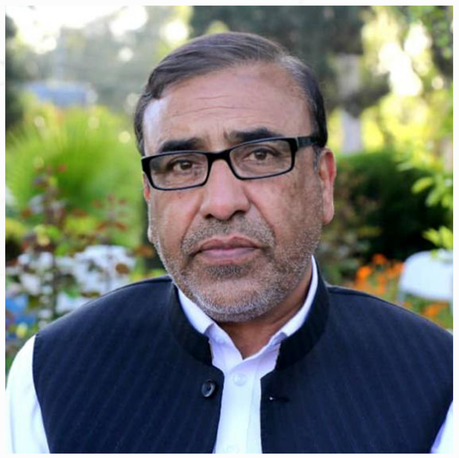
UNDERSTANDING AFGHANISTAN

Collections of Published Articles (2012-2022)

SHAHMAHMOOD MIAKHEL



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Previously, Mr. Miakhel was the Country Director for Afghanistan programs at USIP (2009-2019) and held various senior roles with the U.N. Assistance Mission in Afghanistan and the Afghan government. He has also worked as a journalist and with international aid organizations.

A native of Afghanistan, Miakhel participated in significant national and international dialogues and published extensively on governance and security. He holds a B.A. and M.A. in Political Science from Bircham International University, Spain, and completed fellowships at Stanford University and Harvard Kennedy School.

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Winning a Battle while Losing the War:

An Assessment of Afghan-led, US-Supported Counterinsurgency in Nangarhar Province, Afghanistan, 2019–2021

Abstract

There is an extensive literature on counterinsurgency strategy, its various campaigns as they were pursued in Afghanistan and the global war on terror that anchored the rationale behind them. But nearly all of this discourse has been steered by international experts and practitioners. The field lacks firsthand accounts and analysis from senior Afghan officials and military professionals.

This account, which explores the Afghan government-led counterinsurgency campaign in Nangarhar province from February 2019 to July 2020, seeks to narrow that literature gap and to shed light on broader challenges and shortcomings facing the wider counterinsurgency campaign of United States intervention across Afghanistan for 20 years, which eventually ended up with recapturing of power by the Taliban in August 2021.

Introduction

There is an extensive literature on counterinsurgency strategy, its various campaigns as they were pursued in Afghanistan and the global war on terror that anchored the rationale behind them. But nearly all of this discourse has been steered by international experts and practitioners. The field lacks firsthand accounts and analysis from senior Afghan officials and military professionals. This account, which explores the Afghan government-led counterinsurgency campaign in Nangarhar province from February 2019 to July 2020, seeks to narrow that literature gap and to shed light on broader challenges and shortcomings facing the wider counterinsurgency campaign of United States intervention across Afghanistan for 20 years, which eventually ended up with recapturing of power by Taliban in August 2021.

[1] This paper was first published online on July 31, 2023 by Emerging Economies Cases Journal (https://doi.org/10.1177/25166042231185438)

The author was a firsthand observer of US-led military intervention in Afghanistan and a key participant in state- building efforts since 2001, holding various senior roles within international organizations and the Afghan government. The author, a careful student of international theory underpinning counterinsurgency doctrine and a native stakeholder in the politics and society of Kunar province, which borders Nangarhar, was intuitively familiar with the challenges posed to any effective military campaign in eastern Afghanistan. Many of these challenges were neither military nor based on the strength of forces opposed to the Afghan government. Instead, the greatest hurdles adhered to theoretical maxims: to not only combat insurgents but also drive them out and deny bases of support among a local population, a counterinsurgency force must earn and maintain legitimacy among those populations. Simple in concept, this was a delicate proposition in Nangarhar, a strategic trading hub and the cross-border node where provincial powerbrokers often undermined the state but possessed a degree of wealth and influence that just as often proved necessary to rally in support of government efforts. It also required a careful balance between employing the resources of the central government and its US military ally and ensuring the participation of local stakeholders. Finally, the plan of attack had to prioritize cutting off the logistical pipelines and escape routes for insurgent forces, all of which led across the Durand Lines into Pakistan's restive frontier region.

The campaign—military, political and social—to counter Nangarhar's crowded militant landscape illuminates what would have been required in a known successful counterinsurgency tactics against the Taliban and was lacking in so much of the country. Several critical lessons emerge:

- Political, security and development initiatives must be planned and implemented in tandem, with vari- ous state agencies coordinating closely among themselves and with local stakeholders.

- This campaign required centralized coordination but decentralized implementation; achieving this balance required intimate contextual knowledge of political powerbrokers, their motivations and what might incentivize efforts to achieve mutually desired goals.

- The support capabilities of the US military, especially the combat support of aerial bombardment and reconnaissance, were an important force multi- plier. The campaign benefited greatly from intrapersonal relationships between Afghan government and US military leadership. This report assumes the following structure: It begins with an overview

of Nangarhar province and its political and security landscape, followed by an exploration of the dynamics that made effective military action there difficult. These difficulties were mirrored by the wider US-NATO military intervention. The report surveys the theory behind successful counterinsurgency and then out- lines the strategic planning behind the 2019 campaign in Nangarhar. The campaign's implementation is covered as it first targeted the Taliban, and then pivoted to mopping up ISK.[2] Finally, the report concludes by situating this provincial-level victory in the context of the Afghan government's collapse a year later.

Nangarhar Province in Context

Nangarhar province is while home to fertile plains, the province is surrounded on all sides by mountainous and forested terrain. Jalalabad, the provincial capital and a bustling commercial hub, is surrounded by olive and citrus farms. Ten districts of Nangarhar produce lucrative crops of pine nuts and walnuts. The Kunar and Kabul rivers both pass through Nangarhar, giving it much more irrigated land than neighbouring provinces.

Figure 1 Nangarhar Palace, Photo from National Archieve of Afghanistan

Nangarhar province is often dubbed as the 'gateway to Kabul 'because its provincial boundaries are shared with four provinces of Logar, Kunar, Laghman and Kabul; the province connects the Afghan capital to Pakistan and South Asia, as well as routes to the central highlands and the southeast.

After widespread displacement during the Soviet occupation of the 1980s and the brutal civil war of the 1990s, hundreds of thousands of returnees from Pakistan, when they crossed back into Afghanistan, remained in Nangarhar.

Prominent families and political figures from Nangarhar played vital roles in Afghanistan's phases of conflict over the past 40 years, from the USSR-

[2] Regarding ISK, the group has still yet to attempt to re-capture territory it lost in Nangarhar. The lasting security impact of the 2019-20 campaign on the province's security, it is worth noting that the Taliban's country-wide sweep of conquered districts left Nangarhar largely untouched until the final days of their campaign, after the group had already seized most major cities and had encircled Kabul. Indeed, up until President Ashraf Ghani fled the country with several top aides on 15 August 2021, the Afghan National Security Council had planned on anchoring key aspects of a counter-offensive strategy in Nangarhar province. Author's notes and interviews with NSC staff, November 2021 and March 2022.

supported communist regime to the *mujahedin*, or holy warriors, that fought to eject the Soviet army.[3] Nangarhar possesses about 125 miles of mountainous border along the contested Durand Line with Pakistan. The province was one node of a nexus for trade, politics and refugees, linked with the cross-border city of Peshawar of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa of Pakistan—a hub for Afghan refugees, resistance fighters and political factions.

To put it in context, based on the Afghan government's immigration data at the Torkham border crossing point, in 2019 about 20,000–30,000 people were crossing the border into Pakistan on any given day, both legally and illegally.

The border consists of complex geography and hilly terrain, historically facilitating illicit crossings for traders, criminals, insurgents and transnational militants. From the beginning, Nangarhar was strategically important for US and Afghan military forces, as a vital node for counterterrorism operations, a necessary hub for counterinsurgency and an area that required stabilization. In one highlight of the province's importance, the US operation to kill Osama Bin Laden near Islamabad, which saw special forces conduct a daring midnight raid into Pakistan in May 2011, was launched from a US base in Jalalabad.

As of early 2019, over half of the border with Pakistan was not covered by Afghan government security forces.[4] The notoriously porous border remained a hotbed of illicit trade of all kinds throughout the Islamic Republic's existence; there had never been effective monitoring, much less contestation, of illicit crossing. Indeed, major power- brokers in the province had profited from illicit trade and cross-border criminality before and during the 20 years of US-led intervention. These smuggling barons included powerful figures aligned with the government and figures affiliated with the Taliban.[5]

The security situation in Nangarhar grew worse every year, especially after the presidential election of 2009. Taliban had control and influence in the western, eastern and southern districts of Nangarhar. By the time Islamic state of Khurasan (IS-K) had emerged and grown active across Nangarhar in 2015, the government's authority in the province was on the verge of collapse. Security forces were in defensive positions in most of the districts, barely holding on to their posts. Taliban, IS-K, criminal groups and other militants could easily move from one location to another, without concern about interdiction by

[3] For some history, see Ashley Jackson, "Politics and Governance in Afghanistan: The Case of Nangarhar Province," Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2014. https://www.foxnews.com/world/son-of-legendary-afghan-militant-leader-among-taliban-prisoners-released-by-pakistan), https://military-history.fandom.com/wiki/Haji_Abdul_Qadeer, and https://www.amazon.com/Punishment-Virtue-Inside-Afghanistan-Taliban/dp/0143112066?asin=1594200963&revisionId=&format=4&depth=1

[4] Based on the author notes and information working in MoD and as governor of Nangarhar.

[5] See for instance David Mansfield, *A State Built on Sand: How Opium Undermined Afghanistan*, Hurst, March 2016, London.

government troops.

By the end of 2018, IS-K had been able to extend its campaign of terror to the outskirts of the provincial capital of Jalalabad. The Afghan National Army (ANA) took over control of the city in order to prevent its collapse. Concrete barriers, additional checkpoints and sweeping security measures were enforced, but violence crept into every district of the city. Educational institutions became a recruiting hub for IS-K, even Nangarhar University. The group brazenly broadcast its extremist messaging over the radio waves from not far outside the city limits.

In the five years after becoming, IS-K committed numerous crimes and atrocities in Nangarhar province, including beheading and gruesomely executing local citizens. These harsh tactics did not win large group numbers of new followers but did shock and awe eastern Afghanistan's militant landscape. In early 2019, IS-K had bases in five districts of Nangarhar province.[6] At the time the National Directorate of Security (NDS) estimated that including foreign nationals, IS-K had 2,500–3,000 fighters in Nangarhar province. Not only would they conduct bombings, using Improvised Explosive Devices and suicide bombers, in Jalalabad City and other districts but used their base in Nangarhar to plan complex attacks in Kabul and other provinces. It is worth mentioning that Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) of Pakistan had a strong operational base along the Durand Lines in the Ghorakay area of Momand Dara district near Torkham border, which was captured by Afghan security forces in Spring 2020. LeT is a strong group supported by Pakistan Intelligence Services (ISI) operating against Indian interests in the region and work closely with the network of Taliban to conduct complex attacks in Afghanistan.[7] LeT attacked the Indian embassy, consulates, companies and workers based in Afghanistan many times.

In Nangarhar, the Indian consulates and Sikh community were attacked several times during these years. LeT was also blamed for the Mumbai attack in India in 2008.[8] Confirming that the local agencies of the Afghan government had settled into a destructive but profitable routine, the military council revealed that the counterinsurgency campaigns against IS-K and Taliban had devolved into little more than a mafia war over turf and profits. The government's military operations were good opportunities for security institutions to claim extra bills for fuels and other costs, to sell off ammunition and other forms of fraud. Falsified reporting was rampant. It wasn't clear how many—if any—concerted military campaigns had been launched, in prior years, with the sincere intent of

[6] Achin, Haska Mena, Chaprihar, Pachir-wa-Agam and Khogiyani districts.

[7] https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/lashkar-e-taiba

[8] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/aug/03/indian-consulate-afghanistan-suicide-bomb

disrupting the status quo.[9]

Political Challenges

How the security environment evolved in Nangarhar can- not be separated from the broader timeline of the US-led military intervention in Afghanistan. After international military forces began their large-scale drawdown in 2014, the Afghan-led approach to counterinsurgency suffered. For years prior to the drawdown, the US approach to counterinsurgency was dominated by military considerations and operations. This influence prevented effective approaches to development, political reform and the delivery of essential basic services. To the extent these aspects of counterinsurgency were even considered, they were handled counterproductively: mechanisms such as provincial reconstruction teams, run by US military and aid officials who distributed significant funds and resources, grew into parallel structures that disincentivized the Afghan state at every level.[10]

In short, for over a decade, the US counterinsurgency formula had consisted of direct military action and spending money. Based on the World Bank report, as of 2019, only 30% of public expenditure was spent through government institutions and 70% spent of them was spent off bud- get by donors.

When US- and NATO-partner militaries had drawn down and retracted to a token advisory force in late 2014, the dependencies and deficiencies of the security forces— and the Afghan state propped up for the primary purpose of

[9] Later on, it was discovered that about 17 million liters of fuel embezzled in 201 corps and the case was sent to MoD for prosecution. Drug and smuggling of arms captured in military vehicles. More details explained in Pashto version of Nangarhar account from 2019-2020 by the Author, which was published in May 2021 by Yar Printing in Jalalabad.

[10] In February 2009, the author attended a conference on the PRT initiative in Kabul in which over 250 senior officials of Afghan government and international security forces participated. At that point, there were 26 PRTs operating out of regional urban hubs across the country. Most of the security, development and governance strategies as outlined for the attendees appeared driven by highly unrealistic, even wishful thinking. Supply chains were entirely organized around the international community's efforts and capacity, and lacked a concrete implementation plan. PRTs, a concept the military innovated in Afghanistan and later applied in Iraq, were the core mechanism to deliver and produce all non-military aspects of what the U.S. military first considered "stabilization" operations, and later thought of as the "winning hearts and minds" component of counterinsurgency. PRTs were controversial from the very beginning and criticized by development actors who rejected military involvement in any aid or development activities. PRTs were not only involving in security and development activities but also involving in most of the coalition's social activities and engagement with local communities – often crowding out space for local government officials. PRTs were even directing the establishment of Afghanistan Social Outreach Programs (ASOP), one of which entailed support for district and tribal shuras (Councils) and organizing religious scholars to show support for the Western-backed government. The PRTs were paying civil society groups to establish local radio stations with pro-government narratives. All these efforts backfired because of Taliban's simple counter narrative. Taliban labeled everyone participating as being bought and paid for by the "infidels", and it was true that PRTs issued a monthly stipend of 200 USD; they called them "PRT mullahs," "PRT elders," etc. Most of these stakeholders and civil society activists lost credibility among local residents; the accusation of selling out to foreign interventionists, with deep historical and religious implications, was too damaging.

fielding them—almost immediately became apparent. The Taliban were able to attack and intimidate polling stations across the country in the presidential elections of autumn 2014, and by late summer 2015, the Taliban managed to capture the provincial capital of northern Kunduz province successfully—the first urban centre the group seized since being driven out of power in 2001. Afghan security forces only managed to recover and slow down further losses thanks to the last-minute intercession of the US military— which extended and perhaps even worsened Afghan forces 'dependency on American airpower.

The heavy guiding hand of foreign troops, the vacuum they left as they drew down and the venom in Afghan politics that spread into the security sector had produced military and intelligence officials who didn't hold a firm understanding of the conflict and political dynamics in Nangarhar. Dependency on international forces, resources and planning, no local initiatives and clear direction from the central government contributed to the above situation. Therefore, the basic information on the situation across the province was lacking, and at a local level, state officials and troops were given little reason to make waves.

At the Ministry of Defence in 2020, the author sat down with senior staffers in the policy department and asked how many had travelled to different provinces of the country, particularly the country's security 'hotspots', to better understand the geographic and human terrain of the conflict. A handful had been to 5 or 10 provinces (out of 34 in the country), but largely only to provincial capitals—with no firsthand knowledge of the countryside. If they didn't grasp the basic geography, much less the networks of local influential actors, it was difficult to envision crafting effective policy against an enemy that recruited from and sought sanctuary in rural areas. Even though these are tactical issues but from the very outset of establishment of the Afghan National Defense Security Forces, most senior leadership positions were filled by political relationships, which contributed to tactical failures on local levels.

During this briefing, exact numbers of fighters were provided to describe the disposition of the Taliban and other militant groups in the region. Yet when questioned, the corps command could not explain how they produced these numbers or any other facet of their assessment of enemy forces; indeed, they struggled to produce basic demographic information on villages situated close to the positions and bases of Afghan security forces and were unable to produce reliable records on the number of their own fighting force.

With US and various NATO militaries taking the lead in the first decade of reconstruction, stabilization and counterinsurgency operations, their personnel didn't have any- thing close to the necessary local knowledge, skillset or experience to build long-term relationships that might have 'won hearts and minds'. For all the complexity of the mili- tary intervention, its primary goal was defined as counter- terrorism, and the approach really did come down to

massively resourced manhunts and the distribution of large amounts of money—neither with any great deal of accountability.[11]

Counter Insurgency (COIN): Theory and Practice in Afghanistan

Some American policymakers and scholars have argued that warlord politics is not necessarily bad for democracy or was at least acceptable in the case of the state-building project in Afghanistan.[12] For years, strongman governance was de facto, if not officially, condoned by top US officials in Kabul and their military forces deployed around the country. This was true, even though the Bonn conference that established a roadmap to erect the Islamic Republic revealed a clear international preference for a strong, centralized state. Facing a fragmented society, post-conflict political landscape and lacking any real institutions, the interim head of state, Hamid Karzai, found himself isolated, without much legitimacy or leverage, and advised by US officials to simply buy warlords 'cooperation.[13]

Many strongmen and provincial-level powerbrokers had lost favour with local communities in the 1990s, losing much of their power during the Taliban's takeover of the majority of the country—but they restored their stature after the US invasion, jockeying for positions within the new state and funnelling Western funds into their militias and personal fortunes. They siphoned money from local resources, customs departments, drug trafficking and development projects. An entire generation of strongmen, many of them serving as governors, police chiefs and generals were never accountable to their local communities or to any oversight within the state. Very few were committed to strengthening

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[11] When the author served as Deputy Minister of Interior of Afghanistan for Local Governance (2003-2005), he observed the extent of U.S. disinterest in some of the key pillars of statebuilding and partner security assistance. In September 2002, then U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld made an official trip to Paktia province with the then Minister of Interior of Afghanistan, Ali Ahmad Jalali. During the course of visit, after Jalali made a long and impassioned plea for the U.S. to more seriously contribute to capacity building for professionalized Afghan police, Secretary Rumsfeld casually replied that he wasn't convinced police played an important role in a counterterrorism mission.
It took four years for the U.S. to eventually support the establishment, training and capacity-building of Afghan police, but by then the role of policing across the country had been filled by warlords, various militia and criminal networks, with a low-level Taliban insurgency already underway. The highly untrained, low-paid and unprofessional police were not only incapable of maintaining order, they failed to uphold the rule of law and in many parts of the country, became one of the greatest threats to the civilian populace. On Rumsfeld's visit, see: https://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/os-xpm-2003-09-08-0309080138-story.html

[12] See https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/05/13/lessons-from-afghanistan-warlord-politics-arent-always-bad-for-democracy/

[13] See https://www.usip.org/publications/2015/05/failed-relations-between-hamid-karzai-and-united-states-what-can-we-learn and https://www.usip.org/publications/2016/01/provincial-governors-afghan-politics

institutions or improving governance.[14]

The US Army's counterinsurgency guide, published in 2009, describes insurgency as the organized use of subversion and violence to seize, nullify or challenge political control of a region.[15] It is primarily a political struggle, in which both insurgent and the state use armed force to create space for their political, economic and influence activities.

In order to be successful, insurgencies require charismatic leadership, supporters, recruits, supplies, safe havens and funding. The official definition of counterinsurgency (COIN) is a comprehensive mix of civilian and military efforts designed to simultaneously contain insurgency and address its root causes.[16]

COIN's basic formula can be characterized as 'clear, hold and build': the approach involves clearing contested territory through security operations and then holding that territory so as to isolate and defend it from insurgent influence. The build phase, finally, involves economic, developmental or governance-related activity intended to increase the legitimacy of the counterinsurgents and the government they represent.

The US military never spent nearly as much effort on the 'hold 'and 'build 'components of the mission, which had much more to do with development, service delivery and local politics.[17] In the first years of the intervention, the United States looked to its NATO partners to lead in these key areas of COIN; as time went on, the United States began to assume the Afghan government could take on more and more of the burden. Yet in the security sector, the Afghan government had been established and cultivated in the US and NATO's image. Everything from organizational structure to expensive weapon systems and transportation platforms, which couldn't be maintained without a steady stream of US funding and logistics, was mandated by the Pentagon in spite of years of warnings about 'unsustainability 'from inspector generals.[18]

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[14] The story of this predatory behavior, and the lapsed responsibility that fell to the U.S. and other donor states, is told well by Kate Clark. See https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/special-reports/the-cost-of-support-to-afghanistan-new-special-report-considers-the-reasons-for-inequality-poverty-and-a-failing-democracy/

[15] https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/119629.pdf

[16] Ibid.

[17] On the theory behind (and the flawed implementation of) the phrase "clear-hold-build," see: https://warontherocks.com/2013/11/clear-hold-build-fail-rethinking-local-level-counterinsurgency/

[18] See SIGAR's report "Collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: An Assessment of the Factors That Led to Its Demise," 2022. https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/evaluations/SIGAR-22-22-IP.pdf

The basic problem with 'clear, hold and build 'was not in the theory or the stated objectives, but with US military and Afghan government's inability to implement them. To effectively link security, governance and development objectives, strong, savvy Afghan leadership was required at the national and local levels, supported but not orchestrated by an international military force. In counterinsurgency, strengthening the government institutions and improving governance is the only viable option to deny insurgency the space to thrive, by bringing stability to a local area.[19]

In COIN strategy, strategic communication is important to change the narrative and win insurgency. A lack of proper strategic communication and controlling narrative of the war was a main problem for government and coalition forces from the outset of the war on terror. Taliban and Afghan government opposition groups controlled the narrative against the government and coalition forces. The government was blamed for corruption, lack of transparency, nepotism, indecisiveness and so on. At the same time, the coalition forces and international intervention were portrayed as occupying forces by Taliban and the narrative promoted by the Taliban was Afghanistan war was a Jihad against the infidels. Taliban used religion, nationalism and local grievances as part of their strategic communication to control the narrative and strengthen their position among the people.[20]

Government narratives not only failed to counter Taliban messaging; in the Republic's last years, they actively did harm to the government's key relationships and to its own forces 'morale. When he entered office in 2014, President Ashraf Ghani tried not to criticize the United States publicly, in fact going so far to restore rela- tions with the United States that he was often attacked by political opposition for it. But by the time the United States began to pursue peace talks with the Taliban in early 2019, Ghani's circle of advisors had begun to embrace similar messages of Western interference, offences against Afghanistan's sovereignty, and an adversarial framing of Pakistan's role in the war.[21]

Strategy for COIN in Nangarhar

Factors for Success

Then-President Ashraf Ghani appointed the author as governor of Nangarhar

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[19] In 2013, the author interviewed numerous elders based in different provinces. Many expressed hatred and resentment equally toward government officials and Taliban. Average people remained indifferent to both sides. It is often, and correctly claimed that average Afghans didn't like Taliban, but they resented local officials as well, often just as strongly - because most of them were involved in corrupt or criminal activities. See: https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/08/12/lessons-from-afghanistans-tribal-elders/

[20] Taliban Narratives: The Use and Power of Stories in the Afghanistan Conflict by Thomas H.Johnson, Oxford University Press, 2017.

[21] https://www.cnn.com/2019/03/14/politics/mohib-khalilzad-afghanistan-row/index.html

province in February 2019. The job came with the explicit understanding that it would be a wartime leadership role; the mandate would be to finally implement a sound counterinsurgency strategy.

The author's profile offered several advantages to implementing counterinsurgency in Nangarhar. Senior roles in the Afghan government's security sector, along with the United Nations Assistance Missions in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and the United States Institute of Peace, had brought exposure to American and international military discourse on counterinsurgency theory, and the conceptual and practical pitfalls of security force assistance.

The author had published policy views on a range of issues and was immersed in policy discussions among Afghan political elites. In the course of these experiences, the author established and strengthened relationships with political leaders, including then-President Ashraf Ghani. The personalized nature of the author's access to the president was uncommon among provincial governors, even among strategic provinces the government referred to as 'priority one'.

The author's contacts within the most senior levels of security ministries also proved useful and not only for navigating Kabul's support for the provincial administration. Access to national-level stakeholders was a form of political capital that proved critical in relationships with local stakeholders. Nangarhar-based security and civilian officials engaged deferentially with a governor that had direct access to ministers and even the Presidential Palace.

In terms of personnel, another element of the author's approach to the governorship proved critical: he did not bring an entourage of loyalists or cronies to fill the halls of the governor's palace or other agencies in Jalalabad. This practice, widespread among presidential appointees to high office, commonly bred resentment among provincial government officials. Working with existing civilian and military leadership, adapting/accounting for their strengths and flaws as needed, boosted credibility, increased a collective sense of ownership and provided reassurances that the governor's palace was not being commandeered to serve a personally enriching agenda. This contributed to more harmonious coordination between the key players on the provincial military council.

Finally, the author had previously worked directly with the overall commander of the US military mission, at the time—and had professional connections with Regional Command-East (RC-E) of Resolute Support (RS) Mission. The US military already paid attention to Nangarhar for strategic reasons, including its border crossings with Pakistan and the presence of the Islamic State. However, as noted earlier, mounting counterinsurgency in Nangarhar was far from a purely military task. Counterinsurgency only had a chance of success if governance could be broadly improved.

In order to improve governance and security together, the following issues were identified for special focus:[22]

. Blocking interference of local strongmen in governance and fighting corruption.

. Bringing harmony between security institutions to improve security.

. Providing service delivery and implementing development projects.

. All the above require modern communication and management to delegate responsibilities and empower provincial officials to make decisions.

Like most provinces, strongmen, elected officials and local economic mafia interfere in provincial administration and appointments. In order to prevent their interference, used the power of governorship not removing and transferring local officials by their recommendation. If in some cases if line ministries didn't consult with provincial administration, as governor had the option to reject those appointments and ask for clarification. In some cases, sought support of the President to intervene and change the decision of the ministry for new appointments.

To achieve the above goals, extra resources were not required to a great degree. Rather, a great degree of institutional and cultural change was necessary: the attitudes, behaviour and practices of local officials, and a genuine intent to serve and respond to the people.

First, proper strategic communications were vital, to explain programs and plans to officials, who would then spread the messaging to local populations, to seek their support and work together to offer a preferable alternative to the insurgents. Social media was a pillar of this strategic communications strategy. A simple formula was applied across the board: promise less and deliver more, in order to build credibility.

A second pillar of this new approach was to reset relationships with the historically powerful stakeholders in the province. A series of warlords and their networks, including armed militias acting with impunity, had controlled local politics for over four decades. Therefore, many area residents were tired of 'politics as usual', the status quo roster of strongmen whom—out of lack of capacity or even sheer laziness—the US and Afghan government had often relied on to

[22] For more detail, see the author's publication of the following title [in Pashto]: *From Province to Ministry, notes from Nangarhar 2019-2020*. Printed by Yar Publishing Society in Nangarhar in May 2021. https://ketabton.com/book/14701

'govern 'most of the province. They were tired of the violence that stemmed from the Taliban and IS-K, too. This pillar also circled back to strategic communications: the provincial administration adopted a motto: 'no one is above the law and all should be accountable'. By setting this tone in public messaging, it limited strong- men's options once measures were taken to reduce their influence over local administration and the process of security planning.

Third, the author's personal family background, coming from the eastern region,[23] belongs to immersion in local politics in addition to experience in national government and with international military advisors, bridged counterinsurgency efforts on multiple levels. The author good relations with security sector ministers, knew the commander of RS from his previous jobs and had access to President, helped to facilitate unity of efforts between security institutions and the US military's RS mission, a relationship that had been lacking among some prior provincial governors.

Fourth, in order to improve governance, there was a dual-track plan for (a) gradually improving security in the main city of Jalalabad as well as improving security in the districts and (b) regularizing basic service delivery.

Fifth, in order to create conducive conditions for development activities, all the above activities were interlinked. Strategic planning took place to systematically align measures taken in the realms of security, governance and development—all of which required visible improvements in order to win over area residents.

Based on the above strategy in order to counter the strength of both Taliban and Islamic State insurgency forces, the following questions were considered and became the basis for an operational strategy:

- Where did the Taliban and IS-K draw resources from, and how could they be cut off?

- How to expand government reach from the capital Jalalabad out to the districts and how military operations should be prioritized?

[23] The Author family belong to well known spiritual family in eastern region, Mia Ali Sahib whose shrine exist near Jalalabad and Ghazi Mirzaman Khan, who was influential leader during King Amanullah Khan time in eastern region. Also, due to various jobs, the author had close contacts and relation with the people of Nangarhar.

Figure 2. Author Visits Girokhel Village Near Tora Bora, Pachie-wa-Agam District, 13 August 2019.

- How to boost morale of security forces and enhance confidence of people to support provincial and district administration?

- How to change perception of people through direct and indirect communication?
  From the beginning, an institutional reset was required when deliberating on military operations. The core of all security activity should be the protection and betterment of civilians 'way of life. Without close cooperation with civilian institutions, the military by itself was not going to bring stability, governance and development to Nangarhar's population.

The Politics of Planning

Planning military operations, coordinating them across provincial government, and resetting old habits among the full spectrum of actors involved was not a simple process. There was a constellation of security entities that ostensibly met together as the provincial military council, but most of whom acted independently, without coordinating among themselves, and without consulting civilian govern- ment departments at all. The US advisory presence, known as RC-E was an additional layer of differing priorities, preferences and awareness levels. RC-E engaged directly with the Afghan National Army Corps command, not regularly meeting with the provincial governor or other Afghan officials; this only amplified the historical precedent of overly militarizing the province's

approach to COIN. An entirely new framework was called for.[24]

Even though, by law, the provincial governor was the chief authority in all matters including security operations, in practice, most civilian and military directors reported to central government ministries and departments back in Kabul. Coordination between these institutions was not easy and mostly there was tension among security institutions, both at the leadership and mid-staffer level. There were also precedents of tensions between the governor's office and various departments, dating back to power struggles or the pursuit of self-interest. Nothing about the organizational structure, or the way the central government functioned back in Kabul, incentivized local officials to prioritize engagement with the governor.

Better coordination at the provincial level began with regular, more focused and tightly controlled meetings to form consensus on a comprehensive plan which could be supported by all elements of the security sector, with roles and responsibilities clearly defined. Given Nangarhar's strategic importance, the RC-E and ANA Corps Commanders were invited and encouraged to attend weekly council meetings regularly. Regular attendance of these senior- most officials would ensure that the ANA brigade commanders, who were vital at the operational level in Nangarhar.[25]

Excluded provincial council members created a great deal of tension and strife; many of the region's wealthiest and most influential powerbrokers had arranged to sit on the Provincial Council, and to cross them was to pick a heavy political fight.

Their relationship with the governor's office immediately deteriorated. These powerful figures sent complaints and lobbied with the Independent Directorate of Local Governance, Parliament, the National Security Council and even the President himself. It was only by virtue of the author's preexisting relationships among senior leaders in Kabul that this pressure failed to reverse the decision. There is evidence a good number of Provincial Council Members attending military council meetings sought to remain aware of, and influence when necessary, security operations that might impact their stake in illicit economic activities.[26] It also became clear, soon after strict rules on attendance were

[24] https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/06/22/afghanistan-loves-general-mcchrystal-eikenberry-not-so-much/

[25] The Eastern Regional Command of the U.S. military force, named mission Resolution Support, was called RC-E.

[26] In some provinces, the national intelligence service, NDS, recruited local militias to support ANDSF and prevent infiltration of insurgent forces, which they called PUGs. The initiative was roughly equivalent to Afghan Local Police, but was managed by NDS (which also happened to increase interagency competition, and made

enforced, that the civilian attendees had often been the sources of leaks to the press, to the public or even directly to insurgency forces.

Pursuing the objective to deny insurgents access to resources, the second politically difficult decision that laid the groundwork for our counterinsurgency campaign was to ban the extraction and export of talc and other minerals.

The money involved in this illicit industry was a primary driver of corruption and involved the entire spectrum of stakeholders in Nangarhar, including government officials and members of parliament.[27] Certain powerbrokers obtained legal contracts with limited mining rights but would pursue mining in contravention of those terms.

After laying the groundwork in these early political manoeuvres, it was time for the military council to begin drafting an operational plan to restore security to Jalalabad city and expand secure conditions outward, to the districts—a number of which were completely dominated by the Taliban and the Islamic State. One guiding measure was that every operational tasking needed to be justified by clear expectations and intended objectives. In line with the basics of counterinsurgency theory, all proposed 'clearance 'actions required 'holding 'and 'building 'activities to follow. In this regard, other government departments were approached as the planning for the campaign progressed; development assistance projects were planned to move into new areas, as soon as military advances had cleared them of insurgents.

After several weeks of intensive meetings and discussion, the provincial director of the NDS emerged as a savvy analyst and strategic thinker, with a detailed proposal for a military course of action. But bureaucratic politics threatened to stall forward progress; the ANA, police and Border Forces all refused to support the NDS plan, for a variety of reasons. There were additional concerns when it came to NDS 'role in counterinsurgency, which embodied dilemmas of the entire US military mission. NDS oversaw the operations of paramilitary strike forces, trained by US intelligence and special forces—who coordinated efforts and often undertook joint operations. These specialized forces, operating out of regional hubs and often only referred to by number (the eastern

reform efforts less effective). In some part of the country, PUGs were drivers of conflict, while in others they came to be relied on far too heavily, without receiving the resources or possessing the capabilities of regular troops. In Nangarhar, the PMUs were not organized or financed under the network of a single strongman, like in some northern provinces. On the history of the ALP, see "Ghosts of the Past: Lessons from Local Force Mobilisation in Afghanistan and Prospects for the Future" by Kate Clark, Erica Gaston, Fazl Muzhary and Borhan Osman, Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2020. On the ANA-TF, see "Afghanistan's Newest Local Defence Force: Were "all the mistakes of the ALP" turned into ANA-TF safeguards?", Kate Clark, Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2020.

[27] See: https://www.usip.org/publications/2017/05/industrial-scale-looting-afghanistans-mineral-resources

region unit based in Jalalabad was simply called '02'), had a reputation for top-tier military capabilities but also a consistently higher record of civilian casualties.[28]

In order to align security and governance objectives across all offices and actors, the author made sure to consult and coordinate with Kabul, including meetings with ministers of defence, interior, NDS and the NSC, based in the Presidential Palace. The request was simple, and far from typical of newly appointed generals or governors. Normally, pleas would be made for additional forces and resources, but due to its strategic location, Nangarhar already had considerable resources. What an effective counterinsurgency campaign required was consistent political backing and support for decisions made in the provincial military council. US advisors at the national and regional levels were also engaged with the same request: give local authorities a chance to implement this campaign.

The response, across the board, was largely positive. But it is worth noting that the official line of communications, through departments back to ministries in Kabul, was almost always very slow—which could have impeded the implementation of time-sensitive decisions. The author's personal relationships with key interlocutors among senior officials, including a personal relationship with Ghani, were a necessary element of moving key decisions forward.

Though it took a great deal of coordination and persuasion, the collective member organizations of the military council finally agreed to collectively implement the NDS- proposed plan. One key initial element of implementing this plan was the clearly defined, limited role of the provincial governor and his office. Although in principle, the provincial governor was the supreme authority over security affairs, in this campaign the author determined that the planning process within the military council should take place independently, without much engagement from the governor—other than to review and approve planning and to provide support where necessary, with a focus on public outreach or political interference. As a result, military and security sector leaders had vested ownership in their elements of the campaign; they were empowered through a principle that military scholars and theorists refer to as 'mission command'.[29]

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[28] In other parts of the country, these NDS units would sometimes account for as many civilian casualties as insurgent forces. See human rights reporting on one such unit in the southeast region, here: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/cia-backed-afghan-militias-fight-a-shadow-war/2015/12/02/fe5a0526-913f-11e5-befa-99ceebcbb272_story.html, and here: https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/10/31/theyve-shot-many/abusive-night-raids-cia-backed-afghan-strike-forces.

[29] See https://www.army.mil/article/179942/applying_mission_command_to_overcome_challenges

Figure 2 Nangarhar Province Map (Google Map)

It was a comprehensive one-year military campaign plan. The key objective was to capture strategic locations in the east, west and south of Jalalabad City, most of them held by the Taliban, as well as to capture IS-K's main stronghold in Achin District, where US forces in April 2017 notoriously used the Mother of All Bombs but could not eliminate IS-K or capture their control and command centres.[30]

The plan was structured around a sequential timeline, and was comprehensive, with tasks and responsibilities allocated for a host of government departments in the event of military advances.

In this case, in the planning process, NDS with the support of the district governor had contacts with local elders on how to establish permanent posts, how the local population provide recruitments for check posts under the People's Uprising Program (PUP) and how the military can protect and support those posts. Maintaining security combined with the activities of service delivery departments to provide projects in fields of education, health, agriculture, irrigation and implement National Solidarity Program (NSP). This wide range of planned 'stabilization 'activities included how to maintain law and order in recaptured areas, provide security for elections, being able to include residents in the so-called 'peace Jirga 'of 2019, implementing the conversion of Pakistani rupees to Afghanis after several decades of dual-currency use across the province, and a centennial celebration of Independence Day. During one and a half years about 1,100 small and big projects in Nangarhar province started

[30] https://www.usip.org/blog/2017/04/afghanistan-time-message-more-powerful-bomb

and most of them were completed.

COIN against the Taliban in Nangarhar

The first course of action was engagement with local elders in Lal Pura to convince them to support the government. This engagement tapped into local grievances with the Taliban's presence, as well as the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Consultations with elders and stakeholders were facilitated by NDS. [31] After consultation with local stake- holders, it was decided that several military positions would be built and staffed after clearance operations were conducted, in order to better protect the People's Uprising Movement (PUM) forces that would man checkpoints thereafter. Village elders had made it clear: if permanent military bases were not established to provide cover, pro- tection and resources to the local defence forces, they were not confident in local residents 'ability to defend and hold the territory. The campaign required the buy-in of local communities, and the adjustment was therefore necessary.

On 30 March 2019, the military operation began from two directions in the Lal Pura district, without facing any initial resistance from the Taliban. On 3rd April, the government forces linked up in the Gul Dag area; most strategic locations of the district had already been captured by Afghan security forces without significant opposition.

What prompted such a swift and easy territorial take- over of the Lal Pura district? A combination of factors.

Over time, local grievances against the Taliban and TTP presence had grown steadily; these groups had been present for years and failed to supply local communities with many real services or benefits. Local communities had perhaps been willing for some time to support a return of government control in the district, but held concerns that government forces might leave the area after temporary clearance operations (as had become standard procedure, over the years); if locals had supported the government only to watch its security forces return to Jalalabad, they would have been exposed and vulnerable to Taliban reprisal punishments. The historical pattern of short-term clearance operations, without much planning for 'hold 'operations afterwards, may also explain the Taliban's lack of resistance. They very likely believed the operation was just another clearance manoeuvre, after which their fighters could safely return to the area. However, the campaign plan quickly set to work

[31] Interestingly, NDS also quietly communicated with TTP commanders in the district, and warned them not to cooperate with the Taliban – specifically, to not help them fight and defend territory. A quid-pro-quo was offered: if cooperative, the Afghan government could offer unofficial refugee status, allowing TTP fighters and families to remain in the district unmolested; if uncooperative, the counterinsurgency campaign would target the TTP and deport their families. Author's personal notes.

constructing two ANA bases in the district, with supply chains and resources to support local defence forces. Civilian government departments had already prepared service delivery packages for local com- munities. The district governor had been involved from the beginning; his role in engaging local stakeholders, as well as helping administer follow-up operations and initiatives, was critical. District governors were empowered by the same principles that guided provincial government departments under governor's office. [32]

The military and stabilization (or 'clear, hold and build') plan for Lal Pura was adopted and tweaked for the following operations in other districts. Lal Pura's takeover was also a test run of sort, in establishing closer coordination between security institutions and the civilian administration at both a provincial and district level. Morale was boosted among the security forces, and district governors began to establish more frequent communications with provincial officials and departments; media and social media engagements increased, and 'interagency 'WhatsApp chat groups sprung up in newfound camaraderie.

The next district to secure was Chaprehar, where the government only barely controlled several buildings, referred to as the 'district administrative centre', and the main road to and from Jalalabad. The Taliban and IS-K were in control of the rest of the district. Chaprehar district was important because of its proximity to Jalalabad city. Most of the city's targeted killings, explosions and kidnap- pings were planned by and staged in this district.

Chaprehar district was also a major drug trafficking and logistic route for insurgents and criminals; it was key to the east-west routes through Nangarhar. Narcotics were harvested and produced in western districts of Nangarhar and nearby Paktia province; the route eastward to the Pakistani border ran through Chaprehar, which the lack of government pres- ence made permissive.

According to NDS estimates, armed Taliban and IS-K did not number more than 150 men in the district; this was not an impediment to the security forces at the govern- ment's disposal. As in Lal Pura, the plan called for establishing permanent bases and check posts.

On 19 June 2019, the military operation commenced. Within two weeks the entire district was cleared and check posts were established in designated locations. This operation also ended without much resistance. Reports from the field were that the total number of armed IS-K and Taliban had not been more than 50 fighters, yet they had wrested control of the district and destabilized Jalalabad for more than a decade.

[32] In some cases other than Lal Pura, district-level officials had poor reputations or performance records, and in those cases they were removed from their office. But even this determination was made through careful consultation with local stakeholders.

Figure 3 Meeting with elders of Chaprehar district, 25 July 2019

Following the successful clearance of Chaprehar, the military council determined they should conduct a clearing operation in Surkhrud district, to the west of Jalalabad; they also prioritized clearance of the road between Jalalabad and Sherzad district, which had been impassible due to insecurity for more than a decade. The Sherzad district centre remained under government control, but its security forces were surrounded and could only be supplied by air.

At this stage, the surge in popular opinion, the rising morale of the security forces and the streamlined coordination between government offices all contributed to a kind of momentum in the campaign. A similar operation was conducted in the Surkhrud district, and it was cleared without significant resistance. Shortly after, the Jalalabad- Sherzad Road was also secured, with a realignment of military positions and checkpoints to support these gains.

At this stage, the Taliban's presence had been weakened and confined to pockets in the western areas of Nangarhar, their staging grounds used to attack Jalalabad and main roads largely cleared. (For further read about Taliban

strength, you can to author's piece in FP) [33]

COIN: Against IS-K in Nangarhar

From the start, the military council had determined that the Taliban was the more serious insurgent threat over the long term; IS-K was less appealing to most of Nangarhar's population, and its primary tactic was to mount complex attacks against the government or civilians in Jalalabad. The Taliban had a demonstrated ability to coerce and co- opt local communities. But with several key military objec- tives secured, the campaign's focus shifted to combatting IS-K and degrading its territorial control. IS-K was present and held sway over the remote districts of Achin, Haska Mena and Pacher-wa-Agam in the south of Nangarhar, especially along the Durand Line in the Spin Ghar Mountains.

IS-K held territory in three mountainous locations of Spin Ghar: Tora Bora in Pachir-wa-Agam, Oghz Tangai in Haska Mena, and Bandar and Mamand Dara in Achin districts. In order to defeat and capture these last strongholds of IS-K, operations were postponed until the beginning of winter; IS-K fighters could not receive support from the Orakzai area in Pakistan, where their leadership and reinforcements were based. During the winter, the Spin Ghar mountains receive heavy snow, and traversing them becomes difficult. Transport of sup- plies slows to an ebb.

IS-K was a tightly hierarchal, secretive organization, even compared to the Tal- iban. Its foot soldiers didn't know much beyond their own duties. The group's units of

fighting forces were called *katiba*, each of which had 60 fighters that could operate more or less independently. IS-K positions were located in mountain- ous areas, covered by forests—and separated from one another.

This was not terrain or an enemy force that could be easily engaged in swift, sweeping operations like those undertaken in prior months. This phase of the counterinsurgency campaign required additional air support, including from the US military, but chiefly the participation of Afghan special operations forces. Security actor coordination was even more vital. Tactics required ad- aptation to the Islamic State, too; government forces had to clear roads of landmines, and to take account of the group's particularly brutal mode of fighting.

On 11 September 2019, the military operation against IS-K in the Bandar Valley of Achin district began. Achin was the top priority because it was the chief

[33] https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/08/12/lessons-from-afghanistans-tribal-elders/

stronghold of IS-K in Nangarhar—perhaps in all of Afghanistan. By pushing into IS-K areas of Achin, government forces posed the group with a dilemma; one easy path to withdraw from the fight was into Taliban-influenced areas in Khogiyani and Sherzad districts, to the west. But their prior conflict with the Taliban made this option unappealing.

In years prior, IS-K and the Taliban had fought one another brutally. Earlier in 2019, the group captured much of the Taliban's strongholds in Tora Bora and in Khogiyani district, but government forces and US airpower stepped in to contain their advances. Even before the campaign had begun, a basic approach was in place: the Afghan govern- ment and its US military advisors wanted to ensure neither group fully won out against the other. A mutually hurting stalemate between the Taliban and IS-K was optimal, as the province only had so many troops and resources at its disposal and could not undertake clearing operations everywhere at once. So, a status quo of contestation between the two insurgent forces prevailed in Khogiyani, Sherzad and Hisarak districts, until the 2019 campaign's objectives were achieved.

After two days of stiff resistance, government forces broke the first line of defence in Bandar. In the mountain- ous terrain, there was only one road leading to their strong- hold, which had been heavily mined by IS-K; this slowed progress. It took nearly two months of intensive operations before enough of the Bandar Valley was cleared for Afghan security forces and PUMs to erect new positions; eleven men died among government forces, mostly due to the landmines. In the end, some IS-K members had been killed, some escaped and some had no option except to surrender due to the shortage of food, ammunition and other sup- plies. The winter timing of the operation had paid off. Now, with the Bandar Valley secure, IS-K's cross-border connection was cut-off.

After government forces 'capture of Bandar Valley, IS-K members from Tora Bora and Oghz Tangai began to surrender to the government; they were demoralized and logistically in a poor position; Bandar and the safe havens across the Durand Line had been their main source of sup- plies and support. Over 234 IS-K members, surrendered or were captured. In addition, a total of 1,186 women and children relatives of these fighters surrendered.

The author interviewed some of these fighters and their family members. Most were badly malnourished. They all had different reasons for joining IS-K, but all had been radicalized in similar ways, through pro-jihadi networks and connected individuals in their respective countries. Afghans who had joined were drawn from the small minority communities that embraced religious Salafism, along with some who had tribal or family ties to Pakistani members of the group. [34] The NDS learned that many of these women and children suffered a great deal. For example, women were remarried to other members of IS-K after their husbands died in the fighting. This cycle of remarrying, in some cases multiple times, with children from multiple husbands had a taxing psychological impact on both women and children. One woman who was captured said she had been remarried 24 times. The foreign fighters of IS-K were from Jordan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kirgizstan, India, Maldives, Turkey, Tatars from Russia and big numbers from Panjab of Pakistan.

On 19th November 2019, President Ghani visited Nangarhar with the intention to announce the 'defeat 'of IS-K; some critics suggested the announcement was for political benefit and premature, which history seems to have vindicated. He also instructed government and non- profit institutions to provide humanitarian assistance to the affected women and children. Nangarhar's government lodged all women and children in secure housing and pro- vided all basic needs with support from humanitarian organizations. All male members of IS-K from Afghanistan and other countries were sent to Kabul for further interrogation. Women and children from other countries were also sent to Kabul. The central government had the final decision over their fate. Women and children from Orakzai and other tribal areas, along with Afghan women and children, were kept in Jalalabad to be handed over to their respective tribal elders after due process and proper identification of their relatives.

On the security front, another important challenge was that IS-K left behind thousands of land mines and ruined houses. All the villages in areas controlled by IS-K had been deserted. Thousands of displaced fami- lies were willing to return to their villages but couldn't move back due to the risk posed by land mines. HALO Trust, a global demining organization, began the difficult work of surveying and destroying the mines in coordination with ANA anti-mine units.

In large part due to 2019's counterinsurgency campaign, Nangarhar remained a stable province until the very final days of the Taliban's takeover of the country. Save for Panjshir, Nangarhar was the last province to surrender to the Taliban on 15 August 2021.

[34] Casey Garret Johnson, "The Rise and Stall of the Islamic State in Afghanistan," U.S. Institute of Peace, November 2016.

Conclusions

Nangarhar's counterinsurgency campaign of 2019 proved that militant groups can be defeated with the right combination of strategic planning, coordination among local security forces, civilian government and their foreign patrons and by carefully orienting planning around the needs of local populations. In essence, in spite of a decade of mounting scholarly and practitioner criticism of counterinsurgency theory, the basics of 'clear, hold and build 'can work.

The Taliban's takeover of the country, without much resistance, may reinforce in many observers 'minds a belief that the group holds some degree of popular legitimacy. But Nangarhar soundly disproved that impression. Where the Taliban had control or influence, most peoples 'lives were miserable under the Taliban and IS-K. They live under constant fear of violence carried out by those groups, as well as reprisal military operations. People could not travel to their own districts and villages; most of the populations in contested areas had been forcibly displaced for years. The abuses and insecurity of living under the insurgent groups were tolerated simply because many people saw little evidence that the Afghan government would sup- port them, or might do any better. Since Taliban took over, it has been further proven that they do not care about the people nor they are accountable to the people. They have lost national and international legitimacy and credibility due to their repressive rules.

For the Taliban, Governing Will Be the Hard Part

Afghan Issues Paper

Summary: The Taliban's rapid takeover of Afghanistan was beyond the expectations of nearly everyone, including the Taliban themselves. The Taliban now face numerous immediate challenges. First, they must establish the legitimacy of their government in the eyes of Afghans and the international community. In addition, the Taliban need to address security risks stemming from their own internal rivalries, the Islamic State-Khorasan, organized criminal networks and the need to reintegrate hundreds of thousands of former combatants. Third, they must restart basic government services amid a near- collapse of the financial sector and loss of human capital. And not least, the Taliban will be hard-pressed to meet the urgent humanitarian needs of the population. This paper explores these challenges and makes recommendations for how the international community could respond.

Four Key Challenges Facing the Taliban

Amid the growing security concerns of the last two years, many expected the fall of Afghan districts and provinces to have a domino effect; however, no one expected that it would lead to a spectacular collapse of the Afghan government, including former Afghan President Ashraf Ghani fleeing the country on August 15. The Taliban rapidly overtaking Kabul was beyond the expectations of almost all experts; Afghans, including senior government officials; the U.S. government and its NATO allies; regional countries and even the Taliban themselves.[35] The Taliban now face immediate challenges related to legitimacy, security, governance and how to deal with the humanitarian needs of ordinary Afghans.

The Ghani government's collapse brought everyone into uncharted territory. The Taliban taking control of Kabul spawned many urgent crises, including: the evacuation of U.S. personnel, international forces and allies from Afghanistan; efforts to prioritize the evacuation of U.S. citizens and eligible Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) holders and their families; the rush of thousands of Afghans to the airport in Kabul; the need to protect the diplomatic community and immediate security needs on the streets of Kabul given the sudden presence of Taliban fighters and no clarity on who was in charge. The Taliban and their

[35] Barnes, Julian E. 2021. "Intelligence Agencies Did Not Predict Imminence of Afghan Collapse, Officials Say." *New York Times*, August 18 (updated September 13). https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/18/us/politics/afghanistan-intelligence-agencies.html

facilitators also did not know how to handle the growing crises. As the Taliban overtook Kabul, the world watched to see how they would portray themselves in the near term, how they would govern and whether they have become more moderate since the 1990s or will pose new challenges.

Absence of government is a big void to fill. In the aftermath of the Taliban takeover, it became evident that no national or international actors were prepared to handle this crisis, nor did they have a plan B for the worst-case scenarios. It took three weeks for the Taliban to coalesce their internal factions and announce some interim appointees for national-level cabinet positions.

This paper does not address how and why the Ghani government collapsed, what mistakes were made by national leaders and the international community or how the enormous effort of the last 20 years, at a cost of $1 trillion and thousands of lives, was lost in 10 days in August. Failures in Afghanistan have called into question international diplomacy and policies of all national and international actors in that country. It is a question that political scientists, historians and military experts will analyze and debate for years to come.

In this paper, I address some of the Taliban's internal rivalries and the long-term governance challenges Afghanistan's new leaders will face — in part because they do not understand the dynamics of the new Afghanistan. I attempt to explain what we can expect next.

Each of the four areas where the Taliban face challenges demands a comprehensive and robust approach by the group as well as the international community.

Legitimacy Challenges

It will not be easy for the Taliban to overcome several legitimacy issues — both domestically and internationally. Their decisions thus far are out of step with Afghan and international values. Without a broad consensus, the Taliban renamed the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan the *Amarat-e-Islami* (Islamic emirate) of Afghanistan. Despite calls from Afghan civil society not to remove the tricolored Afghan flag, the Taliban replaced it with their white flag, which they hoisted at government buildings. They also discarded Afghanistan's 2004 constitution.

The Taliban have appointed a caretaker government, comprised of 33 ministers and several deputies, to manage day-to-day business. But there is no clarity on the law by which this administration is run. The caretaker appointments represent the Taliban's old guard with very few new faces. A clear majority are graduates of Pakistani madrassas (religious seminaries), including the Haqqania madrassa in Akora Khattak. The list of caretaker government officials includes some who have done a substantial amount of time in U.S. military

prisons in Guantanamo Bay and Bagram and who remain on U.S. and U.N. sanctions lists — this will constrain the caretaker government's ability to engage with the international community. Further, on the few broad decisions that Taliban leadership has made since taking Kabul, there is a lack of consensus among the leaders, revealing cracks within what has until now been a highly cohesive movement.

The Taliban's caretaker government is modeled on the same system that they had in the 1990s: it has both a spiritual leader and a prime minister or head of government. The caretaker government is neither ethnically balanced, nor does it include women or governance professionals. In a video that was widely circulated on social, national and international media, the new caretaker minister of higher education, Molvi Abdul Baqi Haqqani, questioned the relevance of higher education. In his first speech, he said, "[N]o Ph.D. degree or master's degree is valuable." Some followers of the Haqqani network, a Taliban partner, have introduced the black abaya for women (a full-length outer garment) in educational institutions — dress which is contrary to Afghan tradition and customs.

In both Kabul and the provinces, the Taliban have beaten local journalists and killed former government officials, including those who spoke out against the group. Such brutality and retributive killings are ominous signs of things to come. Nooruddin Turabi, the former Taliban justice minister who is now running the prisons in Afghanistan, recently said the government will bring back amputations and executions as punishments.[36]

Another key legitimacy issue centers on Pakistan's support for the Taliban. Decisions taken by the caretaker government thus far and Pakistan's overt interference in Afghanistan have undermined the Taliban's legitimacy in the eyes of most Afghans. The covert operation by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency to support the Taliban, which is visible in the provinces and in Kabul, has further fueled Afghans 'resentment of Pakistan's interference in their country. Afghans widely criticized the hasty September 4 visit by ISI chief Lt. Gen. Faiz Hameed to Kabul to broker a deal among Taliban leaders. On social media, a photograph of Hameed sipping tea in Kabul's Serena Hotel was seen as a victory celebration.[37] According to multiple sources, Hameed's visit

[36] Francis, Ellen. 2021. "A Taliban founder says cutting off hands as punishment will be 'necessary for security.'" *Washington Post*, September 24. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/09/24/afghanistan-taliban-amputations-executions- return/

[37] Khan, Omer Farooq. 2021. "ISI chief visits Kabul ahead of government formation." *Times of India*, September 5.

exacerbated rivalries between the Haqqani network and other elements of the Taliban leadership because the ISI is seen as closer to, and perhaps favoring, the Haqqani network over other Taliban factions.[38]

Pakistan has an interest in ensuring that the Taliban government in neighboring Afghanistan is not too strong. If Pakistan loses control or influence over the Taliban, this will pose a risk that the Pakistani Taliban, the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), may seek to align with and gain strength from the Afghan Taliban. The TTP opposes the Pakistani government and wants to install an Islamic emirate in Islamabad. Pakistan sees itself as supporting "good" Taliban, who were fighting in Afghanistan, and against "bad" Taliban, such as the TTP, who oppose the Pakistani government. Afghan Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid said at a recent press conference that Hameed visited Kabul because he was worried about the threat posed to Pakistan by TTP members who had been released from Afghan prisons by the Taliban.[39]

The Taliban's recent actions demonstrate that they have not internalized national and international realities. Afghans were frustrated with the Ghani government because of corruption, insecurity and bad governance. However, they believed in national progress, including freedom of speech and pursuing a better education and life; they saw the tricolored flag as a unifying and hopeful symbol. Afghans had the right to openly criticize the previous government in the provinces and in Kabul. The uncertainty about their future has led Afghan women to bravely demonstrate against the Taliban's diktats and the overt intervention by Pakistan. On social media, there are increasingly negative trends against the Taliban, especially among younger Afghans. The decision to introduce the black abaya in educational institutions sparked the #DoNotTouchMyClothes social media campaign, in which Afghan women around the world posted photos of themselves wearing traditional, colorful garments.[40] In

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https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/pakistan/isi-chief-visits-kabul-ahead-of-government- formation/articleshow/85934937.cms

[38]BBC News. 2011. "US Admiral: 'Haqqani is veritable arm of Pakistan's ISI.'" September 22. https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-us-canada-15026909

[39] Gul, Ayaz. 2021. "Afghan Taliban, Pakistan Discuss Anti-Terror Cooperation." Voice of America, September 6 (updated September 8). https://www.voanews.com/a/south-central-asia_afghan-taliban-pakistan-discuss-anti-terror- cooperation/6219314.html

[40] Glinski, Stefanie. 2021. "#DoNotTouchMyClothes: Afghan women's social media protest against Taliban." *Guardian*, September 15. https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/sep/15/donottouchmyclothes-afghan-womens-social-media-protest-against-taliban

opposition to the Taliban's decision to replace the national flag, a widespread pro-flag campaign was started in the provinces and in Kabul. Afghans hoisted the tricolored national flag in many areas across the country. In the face of these protests, Taliban leaders claimed that they did not want to actually replace the flag. Their actions, however, contradict these claims; tricolored national flags have been removed, including those at the presidential palace, the Arg, and replaced with the Taliban's white flag.

Because the Taliban took power by force and have ignored international and domestic calls for an inclusive government and the protection of human rights and the freedom of press, speech and assembly, it will be difficult for the international community to recognize the Taliban government anytime soon. As Ghulam Isaczai, who was appointed by the Ghani government to serve as Afghanistan's permanent representative to the United Nations, wrote on Twitter, 17 of the 33 Taliban cabinet members are on the U.N. sanctions list. At the time of writing, no country, not even Pakistan, Qatar or China, all of which have close ties with the Taliban, has recognized the Taliban government. For the foreseeable future, most countries are unlikely to have normal state-to-state relations with this caretaker government.

Security Challenges

The Taliban are currently comprised of three factions: the Haqqani network, a trusted ally of Pakistan's ISI; the political wing, represented by Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar; and the military wing, represented by Mullah Abdul Qayum Zakir, Mullah Mohammad Yaqoub (the son of Taliban founder Mullah Mohammad Omar), Mullah Mohammad Fazel Mazloom and Mullah Ibrahim Sader.

A row erupted between the Taliban's political and military wings days after the caretaker government was set up. According to press reports, Baradar, who serves as first deputy prime minister in the caretaker government, and Minister for Refugees Khalil Haqqani argued in the presidential palace in Kabul while their followers came to blows nearby. Baradar was unhappy about the structure of the caretaker government. The dispute reportedly was over who deserved more credit for the Taliban's victory, with leaders of the military wing claiming that victory was only possible because they had defeated the international forces, while Baradar wanted greater emphasis on the role of peace negotiations conducted by the political wing.[41]

Leaders of the military wing did not want an inclusive government. They argued for the revival of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan of the 1990s, saying that if

[41] Nasar, Khudai Noor. 2021. "Afghanistan: Taliban leaders in bust-up at presidential palace, sources say." BBC News, September 15. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58560923

this was not done, they could not hold together their rank-and-file fighters. Further, the military wing was unhappy with the leaders of the Haqqani network, Anas and Khalil Haqqani, who were the first to arrive in Kabul after its fall. The Haqqani network conducted some public engagements and engaged former Afghan President Hamid Karzai, former Afghan Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah and Senate Chairman Abdul Hadi Muslimyar in talks about forming an inclusive government. However, in the first week of Taliban rule, the military wing immediately appointed people it trusted — Sader as acting interior minister and Zakir as acting defense minister. The former Guantanamo Bay prisoner, Abdul Haq Wasiq, who was deputy of Taliban intelligence during the previous regime of the 1990s, was appointed acting director of intelligence. Wasiq was responsible for establishing contacts with other international terrorist networks and was one of five Taliban prisoners released from Guantanamo Bay in exchange for U.S. Army Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl in 2014.[42]

The military and political wings of the Taliban are mostly members of southern clans of the Pashtun ethnic group. They do not accept the hegemony of other Pashtun groups in the east and south of Afghanistan, including the Haqqani network, whose members are mainly from the region of Loya Paktia that abuts Pakistan.

The Haqqani network, meanwhile, has argued that its suicide squads played a critical role in defeating Afghan and international forces. They will likely lobby to have a more dominant role in the Taliban government. It is important to note that the Haqqani network joined with the Taliban in the later stages of the insurgency but kept separate command and control centers. The Haqqanis have better relations with Pakistan and some of their leaders have reportedly resided in Islamabad.

By contrast, the Taliban's political wing is more pragmatic and better understands the reality of Afghanistan and the international community due to its engagement with different national and international diplomats during the peace talks in Doha. However, they lack the military strength to control all groups of the Taliban. Most members of the political wing were arrested, tortured or kept under close surveillance in Pakistan. Baradar was arrested in Pakistan, Omar died mysteriously, Mullah Akhtar Mansoor was killed in Pakistan, and Taliban leader Sheikh Haibatullah Akhundzada's whereabouts are a mystery. Pakistan has less control of or influence over the Taliban's political wing, compared to its influence over the Haqqani network.

[42] Chamberlain, Samuel. 2021. "Four Taliban members swapped for Bowe Bergdahl now in Afghan government." *New York Post*, September 7. https://nypost.com/2021/09/07/four-taliban-members-swapped-for-bowe-bergdahl-now-in-afghan- government/

Due to these internal rivalries, it took three weeks for the Taliban to resolve their differences over leadership posts. That was accomplished mainly as a result of mediation by Hameed, Pakistan's intelligence chief. The Taliban subsequently announced their first cabinet in which the military wing has a dominant role. They also abandoned any plans for an inclusive government. The Ministry of Defense went to Yaqoub, representing the military wing, and the Ministry of Interior Affairs went to Sirajuddin Haqqani of the Haqqani network. (Sirajuddin Haqqani is on the FBI's most-wanted list and the subject of U.N. and U.S. sanctions.[43]) Historically, it is the Ministry of Defense, rather than the Ministry of Interior Affairs, that has played a dominant role in Afghanistan's internal security. At the same time, managing the Ministry of Interior Affairs presents unique challenges because the ministry needs to deal with day- to-day issues and engage with the population. With lack of clarity on what laws they are upholding and the need to interact with ordinary Afghans, it is possible that the Haqqani network — in its leadership role in the Ministry of Interior Affairs — will lose credibility very soon.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs went to Amir Khan Mutaqi as the acting minister and Abbas Stanekzai from the Taliban's Doha office as his deputy, representing the political wing. Mullah Hassan Akhund, who was deputy of the 1990s ' Taliban regime and remains on the U.N. sanctions list, was appointed prime minister or head of the *Amarat-e-Islami*. Baradar, as first deputy prime minister, might also serve a representational role at international fora because he was previously the head of the Doha office. But the Taliban government's foreign policy might reflect its domestic policies — it is worth remembering that the military wing and Haqqani network oversee the country's security and will shape the future.

When an insurgency has a common enemy and objective or cause, it is easier to maintain unity among different groups and the rank and file. But when that insurgency assumes political power and no longer has the common objective to fight, power struggles can create rifts between rival groups — as was the case after the mujahedeen ousted Mohammad Najibullah's government in 1992 and fell into infighting. Governance is much harder than fighting and opposing a government.

Factionalism, as described above, may prevent coherence within the Taliban government and leadership; it also presents security risks. If internal rivalries are not resolved through a dispensation of power, some factions may break from the leadership and resort to violence in self-protection, or to pursue their

[43] FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation). n.d. "Sirajuddin Haqqani." Most Wanted. Accessed September 23, 2021. https://www.fbi.gov/wanted/terror-info/sirajuddin-haqqani

own political objectives.

The second security challenge for the Taliban will be how to deal with the Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K). There is the risk that disaffected rank-and-file Taliban fighters might join IS-K. As a former governor of Nangarhar province, I have seen firsthand how IS-K poses a threat to the Taliban; IS-K quickly took over most of the Taliban's territory in a few southern districts of Nangarhar in 2019. It was only after Afghan government forces, backed by air and ground support from the NATO-led Resolute Support mission, pounded IS-K bases and defeated them in their last stronghold in Achin district of Nangarhar did the Taliban reappear in some mountainous areas. I was recently informed by a contact in Nangarhar that the Taliban are carefully checking all traffic entering the provincial capital, Jalalabad, in search of IS-K fighters. I believe the Taliban will face serious security challenges from IS-K.

The third security challenge for the Taliban will be how to deal with political opponents and potential scattered, armed resistance in different parts of Afghanistan. Even though such resistance may not prevail because of a lack of credible national resistance figures, pockets of resistance could be destabilizing in the short or long run. The Taliban will also face challenges in the north and the northeast of Afghanistan from some extremist groups such as the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).

The fourth security challenge is how to integrate former militias, Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) soldiers and the Taliban's own rank and file. Even during normal processes of reintegration, this is a significant challenge. If the Taliban cannot help these various former combatants to reintegrate into society, many may join terrorist and criminal networks. As many reports have suggested, the Taliban receive major funding from illicit drug trafficking, mining and the timber trade; they also levy local taxes on people and organizations. If the Taliban stop paying their own fighting forces due to a lack of funds, those Taliban involved in criminal networks will continue to get money from illicit sources. Eventually, the Taliban may lose control of their rank and file, and these people could be recruited by criminal and terrorist groups.

Finally, more broadly, organized criminal networks will continue to pose a serious security challenge to the Taliban government as they did to the previous Ghani and Karzai administrations. These networks will likely continue to operate and could expand in the absence of government capacity to check them. They may exacerbate local drivers of conflict and crowd out licit forms of economic activity.

Governance Challenges

The Taliban face multiple governance challenges. Public legitimacy is the

necessary foundation for governance, but as discussed above, the Taliban will have difficulty gaining legitimacy given the fact that they have already contradicted national values and ignored public opinion.

The people of Afghanistan expect that their lives under the Taliban should be better than under the previous government. But delivery of basic services will be difficult because the Taliban lack the human resources and international support which the previous government had. The flight of human capital from Afghanistan over the last month has been a huge setback for the Taliban. It will be difficult to fill the void in order to run the government machinery in the near future. More than one million government workers, including security sector personnel and teachers, had not received their salaries for up to three months at the time of writing. (Nonpayment of salaries was also a problem in the last couple of months of the Ghani administration.) The U.S. Federal Reserve has frozen all of Afghanistan's foreign exchange reserves, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has frozen Afghanistan's access to all IMF resources and the World Bank has stopped payments to the Taliban government.[44]

A major challenge for the Taliban will be running the fiscal and financial management system of Afghanistan. They do not have the human resources to run the system, collect revenues and distribute the resources to different levels of ministries, provinces and districts because the officials who had these responsibilities under the previous government have either left the country or are simply not showing up to work. Previously, the United States and other international donors funded roughly 80 percent of the Afghan government's budget. Now, with donors having stopped that assistance, the Taliban faces a massive budget shortfall. The Taliban called back some former government employees and security personnel to restart the engine of bureaucracy, but too few have returned to work for the government to reach its previous level of operations. Imports and exports are down, and revenue generation has declined. The prices of basic commodities have already gone up in local markets.

Given this dire fiscal situation, poverty and unemployment have increased. Based on information from friends, relatives, government officials and the business community, the economy has stalled because the financial sector is not operating as it used to. In the very few bank branches that have reopened, people are allowed to withdraw no more than $200 per transaction. Large crowds are assembled in front of banks. Even Western Union and the hawala system suspended operations for a few weeks, preventing the Afghan diaspora from sending cash to their families in Afghanistan. Some financial services

[44] Byrd, William. 2021. "After Taliban Takeover, Can Afghanistan's Economy Survive?" U.S. Institute of Peace, September 7. https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/09/after-taliban-takeover-can-afghanistans-economy-survive

have resumed, but it is still not as easy as it used to be to obtain and transfer cash. Since people do not have access to their own money in the banks, it is also difficult for the Taliban rank and file to feed themselves. Reports from Herat and Kunar provinces indicate that Taliban fighters are asking local families to provide food for them.

The Taliban have not yet shifted their full attention to governance issues; thus far, their focus is mainly on security and internal power-sharing. In order to run the government machinery from the national to local level, the whole supply chain system needs to work. The contractors who provide goods and services to the ministries must be paid on time and goods must be imported. Without normal functioning of the banking system or transactions with international financial institutions, the economy is stalled on all levels. New officials lack experience running the administration. They do not know the rules and procedures or under which laws they function. Public pressure will likely increase day-by-day for the Taliban government to resume normal operations and address basic governance needs.

The judicial process does not exist. Extrajudicial incidents have been reported in various parts of the country. In Herat, the Taliban hanged four people who were allegedly involved in kidnapping.[45] Despite the Taliban leadership's claim of amnesty for former government officials, there are many reports of local commanders killing former government employees. The Taliban killed a pregnant police officer in Ghor province.[46] Taliban edicts in the provinces are conflicting with pronouncements from Kabul. For instance, in Helmand, the Taliban's Department for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice issued a letter to local barbers not to shave men's beards. Taliban authorities in Kabul later rejected that instruction.[47] More broadly, addressing basic human rights issues such as the education of girls, job security and freedom of assembly appear to be beyond the Taliban's capability to handle. The Taliban responded violently to recent women's rights demonstrations in Kabul.

The Taliban are not capable of addressing these governance challenges in the short or medium term. The mood on social media suggests that most people,

[45] Al Jazeera. 2021. "Taliban displays bodies of alleged kidnappers in Herat." September 25. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/25/taliban-displays-bodies-alleged-kidnappers-herat

[46] BBC News. 2021. "Afghanistan: Taliban accused of killing pregnant police officer." September 5. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58455826

[47] Associated Press. 2021. "The Taliban Order Barbers Not To Shave Beards In Afghan Province Of Helmand." NPR, September 27. https://www.npr.org/2021/09/27/1041025238/the-taliban-order-barbers-not-to-shave-beards-in-afghan-province-of-helmand

especially educated members of society, are already frustrated with the Taliban government. If the Taliban enjoy a honeymoon in the public opinion of some Afghans, this may end soon. Many Afghans have high expectations that life under the Taliban will be better than under the previous government. Unfortunately, the Taliban's governance today will probably not differ much from their governance in the 1990s.

Humanitarian Challenges

The Afghan people are in the midst of a humanitarian crisis. The population's limited ability to obtain cash, together with job losses and months of nonpayment of salaries to hundreds of thousands of public servants and members of the security forces, is exacerbating an already dire situation — caused by a prolonged drought, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the large-scale displacement of people due to violence. Most borders and crossing points are closed for travel and trade. The prices of daily commodities have gone up 30 to 75 percent.[48] The United Nations has warned that 95 percent of families do not have enough food, and that food insecurity is affecting people in cities at a rate similar to that in rural areas.[49]

The World Health Organization (WHO) has warned that the health system is on the brink of collapse and less than one-fifth of Afghanistan's largest network of health clinics remain open. The United Nations has released $45 million to address the immediate needs of the health sector.[50]

In Kabul and other major cities, people have been forced to sell their personal belongings in order to survive. The large playground near Ghazi Stadium in Kabul has been converted into a market for secondhand goods.

By the coming winter, the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan could turn into a catastrophe. This urgency to address the population's most basic needs is putting pressure not only on the Taliban government, but also the international community, to respond — and fast.

Recommendations for the International Community

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[48] Mackenzie, James. 2021. "New era for Afghanistan starts with long queues, rising prices." Reuters, September 1. https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/new-era-afghanistan-starts-with-long-queues-rising-prices-2021-09-01/

[49] United Nations. 2021. "Afghanistan's healthcare system on brink of collapse, as hunger hits 95 per cent of families." UN News, September 22. https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/09/1100652

[50] Ibid.

It is imperative for the international community to engage with the Taliban. Yet diplomatic recognition of the new government, and engagement with it, should be conditions-based.

First, the international community should push for access for humanitarian aid delivery, for an end to extrajudicial killings and punishments and the harassment of former government officials, for girls 'access to education and for allowing Afghans 'freedom of movement to and from Afghanistan.

Second, the international community should establish a third-party mechanism to monitor the Taliban's actions with respect to human rights, freedom of assembly and free speech. Such a monitoring body should be charged with reporting on the abuse and punishment of former government officials, security personnel and human rights defenders.

Third, Afghans and the international community should demand that the Taliban establish greater legitimacy for their government. The Taliban can do this through different mechanisms: by holding a representative *loya jirga* which could approve an interim government, which could then pave the way for elections and a future representative system of government. At the time of writing, it is not known what constitution or legal system will apply in Afghanistan. In the 2002 emergency *loya jirga*, it was decided that Afghanistan would be run under the 1964 constitution until a new constitution could be drafted and approved by the constitutional *loya jirga*. To maintain national legitimacy, the Taliban should keep the previous tricolored flag which represents Afghanistan, rather than a flag that represents one political faction. Many Afghans will refuse to work under the white factional flag of the Taliban.

Fourth, the Taliban should establish a good mechanism with international organizations for the distribution of humanitarian assistance to immediately address food shortages in remote areas of Afghanistan as well as in the big cities before food insecurity becomes a national catastrophe.

The above four recommendations are the bare minimum confidence-building measures that the international community should pursue vis-à-vis the new Taliban government. If the Taliban fail to address the lack of legitimacy of their government, it will be extremely difficult for them to overcome the security, governance and humanitarian challenges that they face.

Myths and Impact of Bad Governance on Stability in Afghanistan

Afghanistan in Transition Beyond 2014? [511]

This paper details specific events in Afghanistan during the last three and half decades. Many of these events have become part of the living history in Afghanistan.[2]

The main focus of this paper is not on the root causes of the ongoing insurgency in Afghanistan, but on the prospects of political, military, and economic transition leading up to 2014. The paper dispels a few myths that exist among Afghans, as well as within the international community, regarding Afghans and Afghanistan. It is important to mention that these myths have not only become a part of the popular narrative and but have also significantly influenced policy formulation, albeit negatively. As former interior minister of Afghanistan, Ali

[1] https://www.amazon.com/Afghanistan-Transition-Beyond-Shanthie-D%60Souza/dp/8182746744 This article is a chapter of this book, edited by Dr. Shanthie Mariet D`Souza.

[2] Author has reported on these events in his various roles as a journalist, aid-worker, United Nations and government official.

Ahmad Jalali once said that "the Afghan government and international community are both partners in Afghanistan, but unfortunately neither side understands the other very well".[3]

Myths about Afghanistan

There are two types of myths, one set circulating within the international community and the other set circulating among the Afghan elites. The myths within the international community including the so-called non-Afghan experts are:

- Afghanistan has never had a functional government;
- Afghans do not know how to practice democracy and see it as perfectly acceptable to make deals with warlords and power brokers or—in some cases—even with known criminals;
- Since the Afghan government is weak and does not control areas beyond Kabul, it is willing to make deal with the local warlords;
- The government cannot function because there is a lack of capacity and absence of laws and institutions to govern;
- Since Afghanistan's government doesn't function because of its ineffectual centralised system, the best thing to do is to ignore the central government and work with the peripheries; and
- Corruption is an inevitable part of Afghan culture.

Similarly the myths circulating among the Afghan elites are as follows.

- Counter terrorism is an excuse by the international community, especially the United States (US), to control the region in order to have access to Central Asian natural resources;
- The US wants to have a long-term presence in Afghanistan in order to curb Chinese influence in the region;
- The US is in Afghanistan to have control over extensive mines and natural resources in the country;
- For the international community to stay in Afghanistan, it is imperative that they maintain keep the status quo-allow insurgency to fester-to

[3] Author discussion with Minister Ali Jalali on 31 of January 2012, Washington DC

justify their presence, even if it means supporting both the Taliban and Afghan government at the same time;

- The presence of international community is a conspiracy against the Pashtun ethnic group in the region, which explains why a majority of fighting is occurring in the Pashtun areas on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border;

- The prime objective of international community is to destabilize the region, which is why they support both the Afghan government and Taliban. This view is particularly widely prevalent in rural areas where there is a significant information gap; and

- The international community is in Afghanistan as part of a larger conspiracy to destroy Islam.

It is important to explain and dispel these myths. To begin, the myth that Afghanistan has never had a functional government and corruption is an inevitable part of the Afghan culture, is flawed.

Before 1978, people of Afghanistan experienced a functional government with opportunities to travel to different provinces, to study in the universities, to fulfil military duties, to work as civil servants and also to address their grievances through the existing formal and informal institutions. All ethnic groups and educated elites had opportunity to serve in different parts of the country. In those times, for example, an unarmed police officer in a very remote part of the country could summon anyone who had committed a crime or against whom someone had lodged a complaint, to the local government office. The elders -*Maliks, Arbabs, Kalantar of Guzar or Qaryadars* [4] [4]were obliged to report all criminal activities to the government. Similarly, with the exception of the people of Loya Paktia [5], no one, including sons of King Zahir Shah and President Daud, was exempt from military conscription. The countryside was safe that one could travel to any part of the country during day and night without any dangers of physical harm.

In terms of accountability and transparency, most former senior

[4] Chiefs of villages in different parts of Afghanistan are called by these names.

[5] Exemption from military service was a reward to the people of Paktia who supported King Nadir Khan when he took over Kabul in 1929. While the men of Paktia did not have to join the army, they did serve in a local police force known as the *arbaki,* which had the responsibility for protecting their areas.

government officials reached the highest positions by virtue of merit, especially in the decades of democracy—1960s and 70s. Examples of this trend include most prime ministers, ministers and governors who assumed positions after 1964 and who did not belong to the royal family. They reached these positions mostly through their skill and hard work. Likewise, in Afghanistan the court system and rule of law remained functional and people had confidence in the system to address their grievances through the formal or informal justice system. Indeed, it was a sign of pride for most senior officials to be honest and poor rather than corrupt and rich. Even to this day, many people reminiscence of the value system of the previous regimes. Remarkably, despite all the ills committed by former members of Khalq faction of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), people praise them for not being corrupt, unlike the Mujahideen factions and warlords in later times. In particular, most senior officials of the Khalq regime still live under poor conditions, which show that they did not amass illegal wealth during their tenure in power.

A good example of the merit based, transparent and functional system is the story of Zarlashta, President Daud's daughter who failed to clear the examination in the Kabul University. According to Chief Justice Abdul Salam Azimi[6] who was former Chancellor of Kabul University, Professor Mohibi[6] of the Science Faculty refused to retract against President's daughter. Chief Justice Azimi said that many people approached Prof. Mohibi to try to convince him to change his decision, but the professor insisted that she had to be treated at par with the other students. President Daud summoned the professor and expressed his appreciation for his fairness and courage and later appointed him as Minister of Higher Education.[7] Such examples are indicative of the fact that while Afghanistan did have a functional government and corruption was not an inherent part of the Afghan culture.

Another myth that needs to be tested is that Afghans do not know how to practice democracy. Many Afghans strongly disagree with this statement. In fact, principles of equality, representation and independence are strongly rooted among Afghans. Most of Afghanistan's local institutions are based on equal participation of people in day-to-day decision making processes. *Jirgas* and *Shuras* (two terms used for formal gatherings) are the best examples of how people make their decisions based on fair democratic participation. In most instances, all the men of a community have the equal right to sit on

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[6] A USIP delegation including the author had a meeting with Chief Justice Azimi on 9 November 2009. During the meeting the author asked him to verify a story he had heard that President Daud's daughter was failed by a professor of Kabul University while he was chancellor.

[7] He died in 2011.

councils like *shuras*.[8] Local political positions are not strictly inherited and elders must work to satisfy their followers or they risk losing their positions.

Unfortunately, in the past and especially since 2001, the international community has tried to impose non-democratic processes and regimes on democratic society of Afghanistan on a local level.[9] They do this by favouring certain local commanders and providing them with resources so that they no longer need to respond to the needs of the communities, thereby promoting a culture of impunity. For example, during the last decade, most of contracts in the security and construction sectors were awarded to warlords or to those who had support and blessing of the international community and not necessarily the support of the people.

The model of democratic governments might vary from country-to-country, but the essence of democratic process is fair participation of people in the decision-making process, governance and selecting or electing their leaders. To this day, many Afghans testify that a majority of local leaders before 1978 were respected by the people, not because of their wealth or rules of inheritance, but for their impartiality, fairness and services. In essence, Afghans have given a fair chance to socialism, communism, jihad, and democracy as the norms of governance—but all these ideologies have failed because of the unfairness of the government and the breakdown of governance structures. The past two centuries of Afghan history have amply demonstrated that the prime reason for the fall of the regimes is rooted in the system of resistance such regimes develop towards allowing popular participation.

As Professor Barfield observes "while Afghanistan's Durrani rulers (1747-1978) may have originated in an egalitarian Pashtun tribal system, they employed a classical hierarchal model of governance to maintain power exclusively within their own dynastic lines. They abandoned the democratic and federal political institutions used among the Pashtun tribes at the local level, and replaced them with autocracy. Because of this, the relationship between the Pashtun tribes and their putative dynastic leaders was always a troubled one, in which cooperation (or conflict) depended on the issues involved.[10]

According to Professor Barfield, the rulers imposed classical hierarchal autocratic model of governance on the egalitarian society of Afghanistan thereby excluding people from decision making processes that impacted on

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[8] There is less or no representation of women in *Jirga* and *Shuras*. Women also have less representation in the official government system as well as the judicial system.

[9] The Maliks or local elders, who are the middle class of Afghanistan, have been suppressed in the last three decades by the PDPA regimes, the Mujahideen, Taliban and even now by the criminal-warlords-patronage system of the current regime.

[10] Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A cultural and political history*. Princeton University Press, 2010, p. 4.

their day to day life. Throughout the history of Afghanistan, people have resisted, both at national and local levels, attempts by rulers to impose non-democratic system or processes.[11] Such resistance has either been through armed opposition or through means of non-cooperation with the regimes. This is the reason why regimes have failed.[12] For example ‚Amanullah Khan's regime was overthrown in 1929 after he tried to impose a new value system without consulting local communities. The same fate befell on the communist regime after 1978.

Since 2001, exclusion of people from decision-making processes or ignoring opinions of people in the political process has created a schism between people and the government of Afghanistan. This has, in turn, created a conducive condition for the growth of the insurgency.[13] Decisions taken in the Bonn Conference (2001), Emergency Loya Jirga (2002), Constitutional Loya Jirga (2003), and in subsequent presidential and parliamentary elections in (2004, 2005, 2009, 2010) have been ignored and undermined by the government and international community.[14] Consequently, the results of each of these processes have faced credibility and legitimacy challenges. This paper does not attempt to provide details about each of these processes.[15] In many of these instances participants were handpicked by the government, reinforcing the perception that the chosen lot were not the real representative of the country as a whole.

Another good example is the recent election fiasco in Afghanistan. Parliamentary elections took place in September 2010, but the results and legal stature of parliament are questioned even after more than one year, despite the fact that close to 120 million dollars were spent to ensure free and fair elections.[16] By way of contrast, back in the 1960s, when Afghanistan had less communication infrastructure, the results of elections would be announced on

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[11] For more details, see "The Rule of Law in Afghanistan: Missing in Action" in Whit Mason, ed. *Rule of Law and Human Security*, Cambridge University Press, 2011.

[12] The communist regimes of PDPA, Mujahideen, Taliban have failed and even the current regime is on the verge of failure, due to imposition of non-democratic system in Afghanistan.

[13] nsurgency grows only when internal conditions are conducive and the insurgents groups have outside safe haven and chain of support militarily and financially.

[14] For further details, see Shahmahmood Miakhel, *Emergency Loya Jirga and Election Process in Eastern Provinces* in Pashtu Language, Pir Printing, Kabul, 2006. and Shahmahmood Miakhel, "The Importance of Tribal Structures and Pakhtunwali in Afghanistan: Their Role in Security and Governance,", in Arpita Basu Raj, ed. *Challenges and Dilemmas of State-Building in Afghanistan: Report of a Study Trip to Kabul*, Shipra Publications, Delhi, 2008, pp. 97-110.

[15] However, as a participant of some of these Jirgas and elections, I have witnessed firsthand that the decisions of the people were undermined by means of coercion and fraud For more details see Shah Mahmood Miakhel, *Emergency Loya Jirga and Election Process in Eastern Provinces*, Pir Printing, Kabul, 2006.

[16] Pierre Tristam, *Bullets, Not Ballots, in Afghanistan's Parliamentary Election*, http://mid-dleeast.about.com/b/2010/09/19/bullets-not-ballots-in-afghanistans- parliamentary-election.htm . Accessed on 18 October 2011.

the same evening, and the whole process did not cost as much. At present, elections in Afghanistan cost hundreds of millions of US dollars and are mostly funded by donors. It is very obvious that such patterns of elections would not be possible to be held without international support.[17] However, it is possible to design the whole new election process in a way to reduce the cost to the level affordable by Afghan government in the long run. For example, in 2002, the election for the Emergency *Loya Jirga*, in four eastern provinces of Kunar, Laghman, Nuristan and Nangarhar, cost less than US $100,000 in which about 2400 representatives were elected by the people in first round of election. That election was more representative and legitimate in the eyes of people compared to the recent elections.[18] In fact, the complications and slow announcement of results has only raises concerns that the election results are being manipulated by high level officials.

Some commentators argue that lack of capacity and absence of institutions are the main problem of service delivery in Afghanistan. However, facts prove otherwise. Afghanistan may need to improve capacity and some procedures in the administrative system. But the actual problem is that of lack of vision and political will to use the existing capacity and to appoint competent, honest people to administrative positions. Incidentally, the reforms process in the Security Sector, Judiciary, Economic and Civil Service sectors have created enormous job insecurity. Many qualified people have been removed from the system in the pretext of reforms. Arguably, the administrative system of Afghanistan is more sophisticated than the UN system[19] and the current work force is not capable of addressing the needs of the people. They can serve as useful advisors to senior officials rather than appointing foreign civilian advisors who are not familiar with Afghanistan system. However, the views of such qualified, honest and dedicated workers in the country have not been taken into account. Moreover, they have been replaced by incompetent and dishonest officials by the government machinery due to favoritism, ethnic politics and corruption.[20]

In 2003, the local governance and administration department of the Ministry of Interior (MoI), had three foreign advisors. The MoI decided not to renew their contracts because none of them was able to help and advise the department of local governance and administration. They lacked the field knowledge

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[17] In spite of expenditures running into hundreds of millions of US dollars, district, village and municipal elections in Afghanistan have not been not held in the last 10 years.

[18] The author of this paper was served as advisor to election of Emergency Loya Jirga in eastern provinces from April-June 2002.

[19] The author of this paper worked as Deputy Minister of Interior, in charge of local governance department (2003-2005) and Governance Advisor to UNAMA (2005-2009). The local governance department was separated from the Ministry of Interior in 2007 and thereafter names as Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG).

[20] Author book; *Ministry of Interior: Challenges and Achievements: A Personal Account, Published by Author in Pashto language,* Kabul, 2011.

which is relevant for governance. On the contrary, the local directors who knew the system, rules and regulations, carried out most of the work were found to be more suitable than the foreign advisors.

Commentators argue that the current centralised institutions or unitary system of government is a cause of instability in Afghanistan. They do not facilitate improvement of governance. This notion can be dispelled as well. Who is in charge of the model is more important than the model of the government itself. Models can be improved and that is a process in continuum. Despite the criticisms labeled against them, the current judicial and police system of Afghanistan have convicted some criminals. However, political reasons and influence of the mafia network ensured that they were released by Presidential decree. Example can be cited of the April 2009 release of five convicted drug dealers by President Karzai. These five men were allegedly close to the President's campaign manager in 2009.[21]

Many argue that the central government is weak and does not exercise authority beyond Kabul. The weakness in the government in Kabul is not because the Afghan government's enemies are very strong, but because the government in Kabul has become hostage to selected few who benefit from the war economy and instability. It could be argued that the current government of Afghanistan is the strongest government in the history of Afghanistan: it has had national and international support, but unfortunately it is not able to use all this support for establishing a better system. Instead, it has appeased those few for shortsighted goals. According to the Asia Foundation Survey in 2011, the support for the government of Afghanistan is still much higher than sympathy for the armed opposition to the government.[22] Yet it is a pity that the government has not been able to firmly establish itself.

A sense of well-being is all pervasive in Afghanistan. People are generally of the opinion that they are better off now than ten years ago. Despite corruption, insecurity and mismanagement, people are still willing to give a chance to the current system. However, at the same time, there appears to be a complete failure of strategic communication from the government. In contrast, the Afghan government's enemies are more sophisticated in communicating their strategies. Their messages resonate more effectively among the Afghan people not because people agree with them, but because they are consistent with their messages and are able to implement their decisions, albeit ruthlessly. For example, if Taliban issue a night letter to stop cooperation with the government and international community, people are aware of the implications of

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[21] Karzai released dangerous detainees: WikiLeaks, 30 November 2010, http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/story/2010/11/30/wikileaks-karzai-.html . Accessed on 19 October 2011.

[22] *Key Findings—Afghanistan in 2011: A Survey of the Afghan People*, http://asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/KeyFindingsAGSurveyBookFinal.pdf . Accessed on 20 October 2011.

disobeying such a diktat. On the contrary, the Afghan government and international community are seen to be failing in fulfilling their promises. For example, on the recent reconciliation talks, different government entities, representatives of the international community, and political leaders have all been giving contradictory messages to the masses, thereby indicating that there is no consensus how to move forward with peace talks. The insurgents, on the other hand, have been better able to communicate through very clear messages and have shifted the debate to their own advantage.

Regarding the second set of myths, there is no doubt that the international community has made colossal mistakes and lost many opportunities to succeed in Afghanistan. One of the principal reasons of their failure in Afghanistan is the lack of understanding of the human terrain, a total lack of preparedness for a long war and a lack of interest in nation or institution building in Afghanistan. As Minister Jalali mentioned in one of his discussions, 'when there was more time, there were no resources to support institutions in Afghanistan, but then when there were more resources, there is no time to build institutions in Afghanistan'.[23] Even General Caldwell, head of NATO Training Mission- Afghanistan (NTM-A) mentioned in his review that there were not sufficient resources before2009 for Afghan NationalSecurity Forces.[24] Between2003-2005, the total budget of the Ministry of Interior of Afghanistan, including IDLG, was around US$ 129 million, but now the total budget of ANSF is more than US$ 10 billion.[25] A look at the involvement of international community and increase of resources every year reveals that the international community especially the US never had a long term plan for Afghanistan. Even now, the contradicting statements made by different US government officials and politicians are indicative of the fact that the US does not have a long term political strategy for Afghanistan.

The U.S. and international community has interest in the region for security and economic reasons. However, an unstable Afghanistan with the dangers that it might become a safe haven for the Al-Qaeda remains a concern to the international community, Afghanistan's distant and close neighbours. There is no doubt that the current policies of spending billions of dollars with no accountability will not bring stability to Afghanistan.

Some predict that the Taliban movement might initiate Jihad in Afghanistan. However, the opposite could be also true. The war in Afghanistan is not a religious war and those who support it do so for political reasons, using Islam

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[23] Author discussion with Minister Jalali on 31st of January 2012 in Washington DC.

[24] NTM-A: Year in Review, November 2009 to November 2010, http://www.defense.gov/Blog_files/Blog_assets/NTMAYearinReviewFINAL.pdf . Accessed on 19 December 2011.

[25] Ibid.

or ethnicity as an excuse. However, since the government has been ineffective, those that support the Taliban or exploit ethnic divisions have been able to use religious rhetoric to further their causes.

Undoubtedly, the international community has committed mistakes and that Afghanistan's neighbours, especially Pakistan, have been supporting the insurgency and have provided them sanctuaries. It is an open secret. As the famous English proverb says that good fences make good neighbors, the Afghans have to protect their own interests. The same proverb, as found in the Pashtu language, says that, *Khapal mal wa sata aw gawandai ta ma waya chee ghala* ("Keep your property safe and don't call the neighbour as thief."). This implies that if Afghanistan does not take measures to protect its own interest, no one else will do the same. Likewise, as long as the Afghan people and government do not take responsibility, notwithstanding the support Afghanistan gets from international community, security and governance cannot improve in Afghanistan.

In 1973, leaders of the fundamentalist group of *Jawanan Musilman* (Muslim Youth Organisation), including Gulbudin Hekmatyar and Professor Burhanuddin Rabani, Ahmad Shah Massoud, Moulavi Khales, Jalaluddin Haqani and others, escaped Afghanistan and crossed over to Pakistan. The then government of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto in Pakistan trained and equipped them to stage war against the government of President Daud. These groups were sent into Afghanistan and attacked the government facilities in Kunar, Laghman, Panjsher, Nangarhar and Paktika provinces, but their uprising was immediately suppressed by the people of Afghanistan, who handed over most of the attackers to the government.[26] The local villagers arrested the leader of the Laghman group, Moulavi Habi-ur-Rahman and his followers and turned them over to government officials. This example indicates that as long as people of Afghanistan trust their government, Pakistani training, arms, sanctuaries and support for the Taliban cannot destabilize Afghanistan.

During the communist coup in 1979, the regime replaced the entire government machinery with their party loyalists and this led to a collapse of the system of governance. This time around, the same insurgent groups and individuals that had earlier been rejected by the people were able to destabilize Afghanistan. It can be argued that the reason for the Mujahideen success was because of the absence of legitimate government in Afghanistan and failure of governance. The same was true for Taliban after the civil war and factional fighting. While ideology might have provided a tool, but the absence of

[26] The author was a high school student and his father worked in Laghman province as Director of ID. He witnessed this operation and arrest of the attackers.

governance and Soviets 'lack of understanding of Afghans and Afghanistan were the main drivers of the Mujahiden uprising, especially in the rural areas. In the present context, insurgency in Afghanistan derives its strength from the absence of governance and also the lack of cultural understanding of Afghanistan by the international community.

Recommendations

Both in the short and long-term, there is a strong need to focus on political transition leading up to 2014 to ensure that a smooth transition of power takes place, along with new momentum for better governance and accountability. The people of Afghanistan will not support a government which cannot defend the rights of all citizens equally. In order to pave the ground for smooth and peaceful transition of power in 2014, the space for positive political competition need to be made available for all the forces. Towards that end, the following steps need to be taken by the Afghan government and international community.

- According to the constitution of Afghanistan, which specifies the date of presidential and parliamentary elections, these dates need to be fixed in order to open space for healthy political competition.

- Once the date of elections are fixed, it would guarantee that the transition is peaceful which in turn would open the space for many groups and individual to build their networks and coalition against each other.

- By consultation of all political groups and potential individual contenders, a truly Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) should be appointed by the President of Afghanistan in order to guarantee credible election process.

- The International Community, especially UN, EU, OIC and other regional organisations (RO) and civil society groups (CSO) should ensure a good mechanism for monitoring the elections.

- Afghan experience has showed that holding the provincial election with the presidential election, has been the cause of fraud and creates enough opportunity for rigging of elections. It is strongly recommended that these two elections should not take place simultaneously.

- The government of Afghanistan and especially President Karzai has to

guarantee that he is going to pave the way for peaceful and smooth transition and not interfere in the election process. A peaceful political transition is legacy President Karzai should leave behind. Since Amir Abur Rahman Kahn (1880-1910) Afghanistan has not witnessed a peaceful transition of power.

In the absence of these steps, the legitimacy of the government would remain an critical issue. Such a government would not be able command the support of the people and hence, its survivability would always be in doubt. In the worst case scenario, Afghanistan might be forced to witness another civil war.

Afghans Still Enthusiastic About Vote

April 1, 2014

In a few days, Afghanistan will experience its first democratic transfer of power. Yet despite the historic nature of the 2014 presidential election, scheduled for April 5, voting day was the furthest thing from most Afghans' minds in late 2013. Though the Afghan parliament had passed several electoral laws in the fall of 2012 and current President Hamid Karzai had given numerous public

assurances that he had no intention of delaying the vote or attempting to hold on to power, Afghans were, at worst, disbelieving and, at best, non-committal about the elections.

Though 11 presidential candidates had been confirmed by December 2013 (there are now eight), the election remained on the backburner for policy makers and media pundits, both of which were focused on the wrangling between Karzai and President Obama over a Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) that would pave the way for a continued U.S. military presence in Afghanistan once the NATO combat mission ended in December 2014.
But by early February, two crucial things had changed. First, it had become so clear that Karzai would not sign the BSA that the issue receded into the background; and second, the presidential campaign had begun.

The candidates were suddenly everywhere and the population was energized by televised debates and campaign rallies across the country. The election had gone from theory to fact and the Afghan public -- even in some of the most insecure provinces such as Khost, Paktia, Kandahar, Helmand, Kunar, Nangarhar and Kunduz -- was on the streets, in the rally halls, on the airwaves, and online talking not about *if* the elections would occur, but debating the merits of the various tickets and *how* to best use their vote.
Over the past two months, I have been travelling to various provinces and witnessed the public's enthusiasm first hand -- a particularly heartening experience given the continued security threats in places such as Kunar, Paktia, Nagarhar, and Herat. After a barrage of national debates and an Afghan media that provided greater access to election information than ever before, many of the top candidates have defied expectations by attracting large gatherings at rallies in provincial capitals and quickly assembling provincial campaign teams composed of influential community leaders. I witnessed first-hand the opening of provincial offices of several candidates that attracted thousands of people even without the presence of the candidates.

These community leaders have made a calculated decision that active participation in the political process is in their best interest because they have a chance to elect a new leader who can have a better relationship with the international community for long term support. This decision is partly driven by the understanding that there is no incumbent -- that Karzai cannot stand for a third term and cannot, or will not, attempt to hold on to the presidency by other means.

Despite all this optimism and the potential for higher than expected turnout, the candidates and analysts are still worried about the prospect of massive

fraud and election day violence similar to the 2009 elections. The threats might be external, such as that created by Taliban, or will be internal, like widespread fraud.

In 2009, as the incumbent, Karzai had the government machine firmly on his side -- a well-known fact that raised the prospect of massive government-sponsored fraud, curbing voter enthusiasm and turnout. In that election, many alleged that the Independent Election Commission (IEC) did not act in a fully independent manner, and while the Independent Election Complaints Commission (IECC) invalidated many votes from over 210 polling stations around the country, Abdullah Abdullah, Karzai's challenger, withdrew from the run off saying the fraud was too widespread and too organized in favor of Karzai for a fair result.
The circumstances are much different today. There is a greater understanding amongst the public about the importance of this election in charting a new course for the country, and more debate about choosing candidates based on their policies and programs for changing the status quo. This should in turn increase turnout and act as a check on fraud. Ahmad Yousuf Nooristani, IEC Chairman, told me on March 17 that they expect 60 to 70 percent turnout on Election Day. The government machine that was solidly in Karzai's camp in 2009 is currently divided between four or five of the top candidates. If fraud does occur, it may not be on the same scale as past elections and may not heavily favor any one candidate, a fact which may lead to a second-round vote, but will increase the confidence of the public in the process.
Finally, the IEC appears to be more independent and technically prepared to conduct a credible election, since they realize the stakes are incredibly high and their impartiality is particularly important in avoiding post-election disputes that could plunge the country into chaos. Even though the IEC's role is very important, the election is nonetheless a political process. In order to have a clean and credible election, the presidential candidates should take responsibility, play by the rules, and accept the results.

After the first round of voting in the presidential race in Afghanistan, where over 7 million Afghans went to the polls on April 5, 2014, a handful of political pundits and interest groups52 urged the two leading candidates, Dr. Abdullah Abdullah and Dr. Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai, to make a deal to avoid a second round scheduled for June 14. President Karzai played an active role in brokering between the candidates and the political elite. A range of arguments were put forth on behalf of such a deal: the second round would see insecurity, fraud, impartiality of government machinery, the specter of ethnic polarization, a high cost, and possibly a low turnout.

[52] http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/11/afghan-presidential-candidate-powerful-backing-runoff

Travelling the country in the run up to the first round, however, I saw a populace that was enthusiastic about going to the polls, increasingly invested in the electoral process, and interested in moving beyond the status quo of back room dealing that has come to characterize the Karzai government and Afghan politics more generally.

To their credit, and perhaps because they understood the mood of voters, both Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani refused to enter into any deals to avoid a second round. My colleague, Scott Smith, and I agreed with this standpoint: the long-term consequences of scrapping a second round were much greater than the immediate risks inherent in another round of polling.
With just days to go before the June 14 second round Election Day, the enthusiasm of voters has only grown. This is evident by the mass rallies that both candidates have held in all corners of the country over the past two weeks. Both candidates have built up ethnically diverse alliances and have teams of committed volunteers working around the clock to reach an electorate that seems even more willing to defy security threats and vote than they were in April. If Afghans are divided in their choice of candidates, they seem more fundamentally united in the belief that the second round is necessary.

The first round wasn't perfect and the second won't be either. For the process to be seen as successful, and for the first democratic transfer of power in Afghanistan's history to occur, three basic challenges must be overcome in the weeks, and perhaps months, ahead.

The first challenge is security. This is not simply a matter of Taliban-related violence. Anecdotal evidence from all five of Afghanistan's national elections suggests53 that much violence or intimidation attributed to insurgents is actually committed by armed militias, warlords, or government strongmen seeking to influence the outcome. The same is likely to be true for the June 14 elections, with actual Taliban actions of lesser concern than strongmen with vested interests. Afghan National Security Forces proved capable and impartial during the first round, and my conversations with senior MOI (Ministry of Interior) officials suggest that they intend to accomplish the same for the second round, but that the biggest threat will be pressure on them to act at the behest of individuals supporting one candidate or the other.
The second challenge is fraud. As we have learned54, fraud and security work in tandem: insecure areas are more prone to fraud.

[53] http://www.rferl.org/content/taliban-afghanistan-election-intimidation/25320214.html
[54] http://www.rferl.org/content/taliban-afghanistan-election-intimidation/25320214.html

So called ghost polling stations that are declared open on election day but are inaccessible to independent electoral monitors and candidate agents are of serious concern.

With no incumbent on the ballot and divisions running through both the sitting cabinet and the parliament, the Afghan government (and the machinery it could use to influence voting) is divided between the two runoff candidates.

This split may also mitigate the government's ability to meddle in the work of the IEC (Independent Election Commission) or IECC (Independent Election Complaint Commission) during the vote tallying and dispute adjudication phases.

In the first round, the fraud that was committed was spread among candidates, reducing its impact on the result.
The third challenge, which is directly linked to the issue of fraud, is the acceptance of the preliminary and final vote counts by the two candidates and their respective constituencies, particularly if results are close. It is the responsibility of candidates and political elites to prepare their supporters to accept the results and trust the process. The IEC and IECC decisions might be challenged in court, which would prolong the status quo of political uncertainty and dysfunctional government institutions. This may also delay signing of the BSA (Bilateral Security Agreement) between Afghanistan and the United States, thereby reducing the confidence of the international community in its future support of the Afghan government.

If these challenges are overcome, and Afghan voters are allowed to choose their next president under democratic conditions, the implications will be tremendous. A newly legitimized government will be able to seek international support with confidence and undertake domestic reforms with a clear popular mandate.

Above all, Afghanistan will have shown itself to be one of the most democratic countries in the region. Given the significant problems still facing the country, this would be no small achievement.

Two Kings Can't Share Afghanistan's Kingdom

Afghanistan has been the persistent victim of quick fix solutions that have often exacerbated rather than helped resolve the country's numerous problems. The investment by the United States and its NATO allies of hundreds of billions of dollars, not to mention the lives of thousands of troops, to build the state's civilian and military institutions, has been repeatedly undermined by the adoption of short-term approaches to achieving stability and security objectives. These quick fix measures, combined with weak leadership from the Afghan government, seriously undermined Afghanistan's hope of achieving longer-term peace and stability.

The Bonn Agreement, which was negotiated in 2001 under United Nation auspices following the defeat of the Taliban regime, gave authority to a very small set of individuals and political factions to oversee the destiny of the people of Afghanistan. From the outset, it was recognized that there was a need to ensure broader representation of the Afghan people in these interim arrangements, especially by groups that had not been adequately represented during the Bonn negotiations.

But in practice, despite some attempts to create more representative institutions, including presidential, parliamentary and provincial council elections, the same small elite networks continued to monopolize -- and over time increasingly abuse -- the powers and patronage of government. The international community's response was generally to turn a blind eye towards the corrupt and predatory behavior of government officials. The 'quick fix' solution of maintaining the status quo was deemed to be the prudent path to maintaining stability, whereas it was the corrupt and predatory nature of the Afghan government that was often the main factor delegitimizing the government and fueling the Taliban-led insurgency.

The United States and its allies often did not hesitate to support and empower leaders who were known to have been responsible for massive corruption and major violations of human rights, under the false assumption that it was better to have these individuals inside the tent, where they could be controlled, rather than outside the tent. However, as they became wealthier through lucrative contracts centered around Afghanistan's war and aid economy, as well as the illicit drug economy, they became more powerful and acted with increasing impunity. The early convenient quick fix turned into a long-term intractable problem.

Shortly after the Bonn Agreement, in 2002, the Demobilization, Disarmament, and Reintegration (DDR) process was launched in order to disarm former mujahadeen militias, help them return to a productive civilian life, and allow the government to begin to monopolize the means of violence. At the same time, however, other militias and their commanders were re-armed by U.S. troops and the International Security Assistance Force, given core responsibilities in providing security for various institutions, and in some cases, appointed by President Karzai to key Afghan National Security Force positions. Similarly, billions of dollars were spent to develop a modern, effective police force, but at the same time some of the most thuggish and criminal commanders of armed militias that had preyed on the civilian population in the past were given arms, equipment, and an official status as "Auxiliary Police," the Afghan Public Protection Force (APPF), and the Afghan Local Police (ALP). These quick fix approaches seriously undermined the role and reputation of the formal institutions that the international community had spent so much money to establish. They also contributed to alienating the population from the government.

This penchant for quick fix solutions has also had a very negative impact on the 2014 presidential election. Despite high turnout in both rounds in April and June, the credibility of electoral institutions, processes, and outcomes has been undermined by all sides pursuing their short term interests at the expense of Afghanistan's critical need for a legitimate government that can help protect

the gains of the past thirteen years and to ensure that the current constitutional order survives.

The institutions and rules governing the election were often bypassed or ignored. The electoral commission succumbed to national and international pressures and ceded control of the election to an audit conducted by the United Nations. The international community has insisted over the last few years that the election process should be Afghan owned and led, but suddenly, hundreds of international observers got involved, with high-profile diplomats and heads of state meeting and discussing ways with both candidates to solve their problem through negotiation. This, however, has led to further disgruntlement among Afghans who feel that their election is being taken over and manipulated by outside parties.

The political framework of the agreement brokered on July 12 by Secretary Kerry indicated that the two presidential candidates, Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, had agreed to a full audit of eight million votes, and that once that audit had been completed they would both abide by the result. It was also agreed that the winning candidate would form a government of national unity and the losing candidate or his nominee would become the Chief Executive Officer (CEO). These key points make sense in theory, but in reality they have served to undermine the trust and enthusiasm of the people of Afghanistan for the whole idea of elections.

Afghans voted, despite all odds and threats of violence, in order to gain for themselves and their families a better future. But the process of auditing the ballots has dragged on for two months, without producing a conclusive outcome. Instead of allowing the electoral process to work, even imperfectly, the international community imposed this deal as a quick fix.
While it looks like the audit process has now come to an end and that the results will soon be announced, there are still no guarantees that the losing candidate will abide by the audit result. There are also no guarantees that if a political agreement is reached between Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, that the agreement will last very long. The devil, of course, will be in the details of implementing the agreement, with both parties likely to interpret the meaning of a "unity government" and the powers of the CEO and President in very different ways.

The conduct of the post- election audit and ‘unity government' negotiations show once again the long-term dangers of quick fixes. Even if both candidates reach an agreement to form a unity government, and even if they are able to define the responsibilities and authorities of a new Chief Executive, the arrangement is likely to break down in practice as trust between the two sides has disappeared. It is difficult to see how the parties that have failed to agree

to a power-sharing agreement for two months, despite intense pressure to do so, will be able to effectively share power.

Afghanistan's constitution is very clear: According to its unitary system, administrative authority is delegated to all ministers and other officials by the president. Experience from other countries where international mediators have attempted to forge power-sharing agreements after highly disputed election outcomes, including Cambodia in 1993, Cote d'Ivoire in 2001, and Zimbabwe and Kenya in 2008, demonstrates the fragility of such arrangements over the long run. In 2004, the international community urged Afghans to create a constitution as a means of establishing long-term stability.

Ten years later, in order to solve a short -term political problem, it has created another quick fix --but this one will likely make the constitution unworkable. As a famous Afghan saying reminds us: "A thousand beggars can live under one quilt, but two kings cannot share a kingdom.

Let Afghan Voters Finish the Job

Kabul has been full of rumors of an attempt to reach a “political deal” in order to avoid a second round of voting required by the constitution. Strangely, most of the reporting in the western press has treated such a deal as if it would be desirable. We believe it would be a huge mistake.

According to the preliminary complete results released by the election commission no candidate reached the 50 percent required for the first round to be decisive. The final results, following adjudication of complaints, are not likely too change significantly. A run-off has been scheduled for June 7 between Abdullah Abdullah, the first place candidate with 44.9 percent of the votes, and the clear second-place candidate, Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai with 31.5 percent.

Despite some complaints of fraud and irregularities, the election has gone remarkably well so far. It is therefore curious that there are increasing reports of an attempt behind the scenes to negotiate a “coalition government” to avoid the second round required by the constitution. This would be a huge setback for democracy in Afghanistan and likely a costly mistake.

The April 5 and pre-election campaigning by candidates did everything an election is supposed to do. It mobilized voters. It re-legitimized the constitutional order. The high turnout was a resounding statement of support for democracy, a rejection of the Taliban, and a declaration of confidence in the Afghan National Security Forces.

The desire for a deal is partly motivated by legitimate concerns about a second round. The Taliban, seen to have been humiliated by their inability to undermine the first round, will likely seek to demonstrate their political relevance and capacity for violence. Voter turnout may be lower as fears of violence take hold and the enthusiasm of the first round wears off. Voting patterns in the second round may be more clearly along ethnic and regional lines, undermining the sense of national unity presented by the cross-ethnic voting in the first round. Finally, the incidence of fraud may be higher since the stakes are as well.

These risks are, however, not sufficient reasons to engineer a political deal to pre-empt a second round. The same hazards were present before the first round and most of them failed to materialize. The much larger risk is that a political deal to avoid a second round will most likely provide short-term relief and long-term pain. It is possible that the second round will partially negate the good news from the first round, but a political deal would essentially invalidate the votes cast in the first round. This would be a more serious blow to the

development and entrenchment of Afghan democracy than the seriously flawed elections in 2009. It would rob the government that emerged of any legitimacy, and would reinforce the Taliban argument that had been denied to them by seven million voters—that Afghanistan's democratic constitution cannot work. Finally, it would severely weaken the basis of accommodation that has held Afghan elites together, namely the constitution.

One of the key reasons that it was so important to hold the first round on time and according to the constitution was to preserve the constitutional order and legitimacy of the government through non-violent means. The constitution represents the "rules of the game" by which Afghan political elites have agreed to play. One of the unrecognized successes of the past 13 years is that the constitution has managed to hold together a group of powerful political figures.

In the past, whether or not Afghan elites fully embraced democracy, with its accompanying ideals of civic rights, popular participation in government, and accountability; they had at least embraced the process of elections as a means of establishing the respective clout of major political players. This determination could be used in negotiations among themselves over how to distribute government positions. In other words, they had accepted "electoralism" if not democracy.

The first round yielded a far more positive result, however. The extent of voter turnout showed that, whatever political elites believed, Afghans were eager to exercise their civic rights. Voting patterns relied less on ethnicity than was previously assumed. The electoral institutions performed far better than in previous elections, and the state apparatus led by Hamid Karzai did not intervene in any meaningful way. Not only was the constitutional order preserved, it was roundly endorsed.

This is why it would be folly to interrupt a successful constitutional process with a political deal that is in violation of the current electoral law and might well be unconstitutional. Both leading candidates have stated that they wanted to contest a second round if called for by the results of the first round. For the sake of their own reputations and the government that one of them will lead, they must both stick to this position. The Independent Election Commission of Afghanistan is prepared to conduct the runoff.

The international community has a role to play. In the months leading up to the first round, they correctly avoided any involvement in the politics of the election, focusing on the process. They made clear that a future relationship with Afghanistan depended on holding credible, on-time elections. Afghanistan, largely due to Afghan voters, delivered on this. Now the international community and Afghan elites must honor its side of the bargain by letting the election

reach its natural conclusion, which requires the fulfillment of the constitutional process. Public statements about the challenges of holding a second round are understandable, but these should not be read as supporting a deal.

Both leading candidates would like to have an inclusive government and better international relationships with the west, especially the United States. Their credibility with domestic political actors and international donors will be enhanced by a legitimate election. Afghans faced risks in the first round and delivered a stunning endorsement of democracy. It would be wrong to deprive them now of their democratic opportunity

Lessons from Afghanistan's tribal elders

A recent meeting of 200 Afghan tribal elders that I attended in Kabul illustrates why the 2014 presidential election will be pivotal to recapturing the Afghan people's trust in their government and establishing the kind of stability they -- and the international community -- crave.

The association of elders, known as *maliks*, was holding its annual meeting in April, gathering representatives from all of Afghanistan's 34 provinces and most of its districts, and inviting government officials and civil society leaders to discuss the critical issues facing their country at the local level. These maliks are key links between the people and the government in Afghanistan -- serving in semi-official roles for resolving disputes, delivering a measure of justice, and providing basic services when possible.

In my meeting with the group, I tried to understand why neither they nor the Afghan security forces, which most often outnumber the Taliban, can resist the militants, even when the elders say the presence of insurgents wreaks havoc on the local population. The maliks reported that they might have no more than 50 Taliban in their area, but as many as 300 to 500 government police officers or army soldiers on the ground. Helmand province alone has 12,000 police officers, according to one provincial official. I also asked the maliks how many people lived in their districts and the answers ranged from 50,000 to 200,000.

These ratios seem stacked in the government's favor. So why couldn't 300 to 500 Afghan security forces successfully take on 50 Taliban fighters, especially when thousands of people would benefit from such efforts?

The 200 elders made the answer clear: it's not about the size of the security forces or the quality of their equipment. It's about whether the Afghan people believe that the government and, by extension, the armed forces represent their interests and will defend their concerns. The public's trust has been eroded by widespread official corruption and efforts by the elite, and even the security forces, to enrich themselves as a hedge against the worst-case scenarios of a dramatic drop in international assistance or a collapse of the government.

From the perspective of these elders, it's as though two groups that don't represent them are fighting each other - one being the government and the other, the Taliban, fighting that government. The majority of ordinary Afghans are indifferent to both. Supporting either side makes no sense, according to the elders, when neither can be trusted to deliver on promises of security, justice, and services.

Before the 2010 U.S.-Afghan military offensive against the Taliban in Helmand province's town of Marja, then-General Stanley McChrystal **famously commented** that the international troops were prepared, once they vanquished the enemy, to install a "government in a box." The idea was to support a group of Afghan administrators and a provincial governor to immediately provide the services the people needed, along with the security that the troops were to deliver.
But you don't know what's in that box. How many pieces are there? Are they rotten? Building up the Afghan police and army has to be paired with credible governance.

The presidential elections scheduled for April next year provide another chance at that goal. With that date approaching and most international forces due to depart Afghanistan by the end of 2014, the comments of the elders should be a warning bell, not only for the contenders hoping to succeed President Hamid Karzai, but also for the international community and the United States, which has invested so heavily in Afghanistan's future.

International assistance for continuing to strengthen and modernize Afghanistan's security forces is important, of course. But without the trust of the Afghan people, the government that comes to power after the election will stand little chance of faring better than Karzai's regime. The successor also will have

little chance of defeating the Taliban, or at least solidifying a strong negotiating position.

When the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan in 1992, they left behind the communist regime of Mohammad Najibullah, who was arguably in a much stronger position than Karzai today. Najibullah had hundreds of planes, thousands of tanks, heavy artillery, and a million-man military force. Yet, none of these could save the regime because people didn't have confidence that the security forces could successfully challenge the formidable, U.S.-backed *mujahideen* forces. The final blow came when the Soviet Union collapsed, and with it the financing that Najibullah had counted on.
In other words, if we want to save Afghanistan from collapse and another civil war that might lead to the re-establishment of safe havens for terrorist groups, it is imperative that the international community, especially the United States, supports a credible and inclusive electoral process that will be acceptable to the majority of Afghans and win continued international support. Without a government that represents the interests and values of the people, no amount of money and military force will be able to fill the legitimacy vacuum.

In Afghanistan, No Leadership Means No Elections

January 29, 2016

The only way for Afghanistan to avert electoral disaster is if the Ghani government and parliament act together to take cohesive and swift action.

In 2014, Afghanistan's presidential election was marred by accusations of fraud. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry intervened and brought together the two candidates, Mohammad Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, to form what is now the National Unity Government (NUG), with Ghani serving as president and Abdullah as chief executive officer. Though the agreement appeared to be a suitable outcome for two men intent on securing the presidency, the NUG is nothing more than a quick fix that undermines the country's electoral institutions and processes.

Afghanistan undoubtedly inherited much of its current crisis from the previous administration of Hamid Karzai. But now, security and governance conditions have deteriorated after the NUG's lack of meaningful progress. After more than

a year in office, the government's approval rating is under 20 percent3, according to a survey conducted in August 2015. Since then, the situation has only grown worse. In September, the Taliban briefly overtook Kunduz, and thousands of young Afghans continue to leave for Europe as job prospects and quality of life improvements grow more and more difficult to find at home.

The political framework for the NUG, agreed upon by both President Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah, includes fundamental changes to the electoral system to ensure fully credible future elections. Immediately after the NUG's establishment, Ghani was expected to issue a decree to form an Electoral Reform Commission (ERC) to rework the electoral system in accordance with Article 7 of the Political Framework. In July 2015, after an eight month delay over disagreements on the commission's composition, a 14-member body with one non-voting U.N. member was created. (I was a member of the commission.) The agreement also mandated that Ghani convene a Loya Jirga (Grand Assembly) — under processes laid out in the Afghan Constitution — within two years.

Any change to the electoral process will directly impact the makeup of future parliaments and governments. Despite this responsibility, the majority of ERC members merely promoted their political agendas and provided impractical recommendations that lacked popular support.
Nevertheless, in September 2015 the NUG issued a legal decree approving seven of the ERC's recommendations, while sending three back for further review. The most controversial recommendation suggested changing the electoral system from the single non-transferable vote (SNTV) a to parallel

proportion system (PPS). As the literacy rate in Afghanistan is only 31 percent, the SNTV system was chosen in 2003 because of its easy voting and counting procedures.

The disadvantage of this system is vote-wasting, as the candidates are elected by a simple majority. While relatively fewer votes are wasted under a PPS system, it is more complicated. Voters must choose their preferred candidates from hundreds of options, or cast votes based on hard-to-understand political manifestos. In an underdeveloped country like Afghanistan, this system cannot be practically implemented to allow all citizens to take advantage of their voting rights.

Some argue that the ERC's proposed recommendations breach multiple articles of the Constitution. In particular, article 83 stipulates that members of the Wolesi Jirga, Afghanistan's lower house of parliament, shall be elected through the free, universal, secret, and direct vote of the people. The switch from the SNTV to the PPS system recommended by the ERC violates this article. If the government wants to bring changes to the electoral system, the best option is the first-past-the-post voting system, with a Single Member District for each constituency. This system allows a natural and gradual opportunity for political parties to form and consolidate, while also giving independent candidates an opportunity to campaign for a seat in parliament.

The debate on electoral reform continues among ERC members, the NUG, Parliament, and the people.

On Dec. 26, the 127 present members of the Wolesi Jirga sharply rejected — by a vote of 116 to 11 — the recommendations of the ERC from the September presidential decree. On Jan. 5, the Meshrano Jirga, Afghanistan's upper house of parliament, also rejected the presidential decree with a vote of 38 to 12.

Previously, on Dec. 21, 2015, the ERC issued anew round of proposals that suggested reforming the electoral system through a combination of a multidimensional representation system (MDRS) and PPS, which would provide a one-third quota for political parties and the remaining two-thirds for individual candidates. The level of disconnect between the NUG and Parliament is alarming, and it is the Afghan voter who pays the steepest price.

On Jan. 18, in a surprising move, the Independent Election Commission (IEC) announced that parliamentary and district elections will be held on Oct. 15. Meanwhile, Chief Executive Abdullah has said that the government is committed to implementing systematic reforms in the election system, stressing that parliamentary and district council elections will be held after necessary reforms are undertaken. However, the president office's remains curiously quiet about the elections announcement. In practice, the elections may not happen due to the enormous heavy lifting to prepare voter lists and demarcate district boundaries. But the will of the government cannot be discounted, and if they put the necessary strength and desire into holding the elections, then in theory, perhaps they will happen.

If progress is to be made, the government and international stakeholders must deal with two main concerns: how to hold parliamentary elections this year and how to arrange a Loya Jirga (as promised in the NUG deal).

If these issues go unaddressed, Afghanistan will face another deep political crisis in the coming years.

Until a resolution is reached to establish a revised election process, the next round of parliamentary elections will suffer further delay. If elections are not

held, it is unlikely that a Loya Jirga can be arranged. Promised within a two-year time frame of the NUG's formation, the Loya Jirga approves the position of chief executive, can amend the Constitution, and rules on orders of superior national interest. If the election does not occur, the Loya Jirga will not happen in September 2016 as promised. The whole NUG would lack a legal basis and lose legitimacy. If there is no NUG-sponsored Loya Jirga, political opponents of the government will likely call for a traditional, or consultative, Loya Jirga, which does not have the authority to change the constitution, but could unleash a flood of unwelcome criticism of the NUG, including a review of the Bilateral Security Agreement with the United States and several other nationally contentious issues. This could present a dire scenario: a body of questionable legitimacy raising questions that could undermine whatever political stability remains.

Although the Wolesi Jirga's and Meshrano Jirga's rejections of the electoral decree in December and January, respectively, is a setback for the NUG and the ERC, it could pave the way for parliamentary elections under the existing electoral system. There is an opportunity for the government to conduct elections under the existing legal framework and avoid a constitutional and political crisis. The responsibility to the Afghan people and their ability to reliably elect leaders falls on the shoulders of the NUG and Parliament. Now, these two bodies must acknowledge the need to compromise and come together to ensure a stable future for Afghanistan's elections.

Seizing new opportunity for regional cooperation and understanding

> *"History writing in every age is a biased operation. This is because no historian, no matter how much they try, can be free of all bias. Therefore, there are different versions and books on history, since if one could write an 'unbiased' and 'objective' version of history, all the other historians would be out of business."*[55]

Introduction

Myths and (mis)perceptions are invisible and inseparable parts of eastern culture, especially within South Asia. Unfortunately, South Asian politicians cover their personal failures to promote good governance; effective security and economic growth have often turned to exploiting historic myths and misperceptions within the region in order to divert attention of people from the real problems. While this may be an effective populist tool for reelection or consolidating power, it has historically led to fractured regional politics.

In the Afghan context, last year, I participated in a conference which was organized by the National University of Singapore and I talked about myths and perceptions of Afghans about the International Community and vice versa myths and perceptions amongst international community about Afghans and Afghanistan[56]. The paper I presented dispels a few myths that exist among Afghans, as well as within the international community regarding Afghans and Afghanistan. It is important to mention that these myths have not only become a part of the popular narrative and but have also significantly influenced policy formulation, albeit negatively. As former interior minister of Afghanistan, Ali Ahmad Jalali once said, "the Afghan government and international community are both partners in Afghanistan, but unfortunately neither side understands the other very well."

I am glad that the 7th Annual South Asia Conference, organized by IDSA, is dedicated to exploring regional perceptions in South Asia. I strongly believe that these myths and (mis)perceptions have had an adverse impact on security, economic growth, governance, and regional cooperation amongst all the regional states. Changing these deleterious perceptions will depend on sincere efforts by political leaders and elites of all these respective countries to work hard to remove unsubstantiated allegation against each other. Politician and

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[55] Yaqoob Bangash, "Historical myths and realities", September 15, 2013, at http://jang.com.pk/thenews/sep2013-weekly/nos-15-09-2013/pol1.htm#1

[56] The proceeding of this conference was published as a book; Afghanistan in Transition: Beyond 2014? Article of the author included. http://www.pentagonpress.in/servlet/ppGetbiblio?bno=511 (accessed October 07, 2013)

elites of this region should justify their argument and policies on the needs of 21st century, not based on the myths and perception of the past. South Asia's political leaders must move away from the rhetoric of the cold war or great game in the region, and look to develop a new political culture that embraces modern challenges and opportunities for the region. The region must move away from the model of blaming their neighbors and foreigners for the historic failures to provide good governance and stability in their own countries. There is a strong need for elites and politicians of this region to change their mindset.

In this conference, I will share a few examples of these (mis)perceptions since 2001 about Afghanistan's relationship with India and Pakistan. I believe the underlining factor to improving relationship between our regional states is improving governance in each of these countries, and an increased role of a new generation of politicians who will have the energy and vision to construct a new vision of the world and the region from fresh and new perspectives.

Historic background about Afghanistan and India:

India and Afghanistan are distance neighbors but they have very close historic, culture, economic and political ties over centuries. Since inception of Pakistan in 1947, relationships of successive Afghan governments were much stronger with India than compare to Pakistan. Even people to people relationship between Afghanistan and India were stronger till the coup of 1978 in Afghanistan. Afghanistan and India were members of Non-Aligned Movement but both countries had close relationship with the former Soviet Union. At the time when India and Afghanistan were looking to the Soviet Union, Pakistan was part of SEATO (Southeast Asia Treaty Organization) and CENTO (Central Treaty Organization)[57] and had close links to the US and western countries.

Dynamic of this relationship changed after the coup of 1978 and the Soviet Union invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Millions of Afghans rose up against the Soviet Union occupation and millions of others immigrated to Pakistan, along with other regional countries. Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan affairs increased while at the same time India's influence declined due to supporting unpopular communist regimes and until collapse of Dr. Najibullah in 1992.

Before 1978, traditionally, India had close ties with Pashtuns on the both sides of Durand line and supported governments of Afghanistan policies of Pashtunistan toward Pakistan. During partition time, Mahatma Gandhi and Bacha Khan (Khan Abdul Ghafar Khan) had closed ties and supported the cause of Pashtun on both side of Durand lines.

After the collapse of Najibullah government in 1992, India was in an odd position because most of Pashtun groups were supported by Pakistan and India had shifted their support to non-Pashtun groups such as the northern alliance. Pakistan used this relationship as good tool of propaganda to support Taliban inside Afghanistan which analysts and experts argue still continues in

[57] http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/23567/mohammed-ayub-khan/the-pakistan-american-alliance (accessed September 12, 2013)

the form of supporting selected groups of Taliban insurgency, while portraying that it as Pashtun nationalist movement. In reality, these rivalries between India and Pakistan have very negative impact on stability of Afghanistan.

After 2001, India pledged to support the new government of President Karzai and promised to take active part in rebuilding of Afghanistan. Today, India is the fifth largest bi-lateral donor in Afghanistan and assistance stands up to $2 billion.[58]

There might be some links of suspicion between some activities of India in Western or Southeastern part of Afghanistan to alarm Pakistan but in most cases these concerns are exaggerated. Pakistan publicly criticized India's large presence in the country and raised their concern with Afghan authorities in various forums. At one point, there were even exaggerated reports from Pakistan that India has 32 consulates in Afghanistan. [59] This exaggeration of India's presence in Afghanistan rooted in historical mistrust and misperception between these two countries is not based on reality and facts. Rather, it is based more on strategic depth policy between India and Afghanistan since inception of Pakistan. There is no doubt that these soar relationships have direct impact on peace, stability and economic growth of Afghanistan. We all know that free trade and transit between Afghanistan, Pakistan and India will benefit our people but due to past hostility, myths and misperception, there is very little progress in this field and millions of people suffer from poverty in this region. As British historian William Dalrymple, mentioned on 26 June 2013 in his article for *The Guardian*, "Forget NATO v the Taliban. The real Afghan fight is India v Pakistan."

Relationship of India with Afghanistan and reaction of Pakistan since 2001:

As mentioned before, Pakistan is very suspicious about India's presence in Afghanistan. I have seen these reactions first hand in three different tracks two and track one and a half dialogues between Afghanistan, Pakistan and

[58] http://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/afghanistan-aug-2012.pdf (accessed September 12, 2013)

[59] http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/indian-consulates-theory-incorrect-pakistan/article3155622.ece (accessed September 12, 2013)

India, which I have attended since 2008.[60] Pakistan's argument is that India would like to support anti-Pakistani element in Afghanistan, especially Baluchistan Liberation Army (BLA), a separatist movement in Pakistan. Most recently, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan has openly stated that these outstanding issues of India's interference in Baluchistan need to be addressed. But India denies Pakistan's claim and has stated repeatedly that they are involved in Afghanistan on the behest of the Afghan government to contribute to reconstruction and rebuilding. There is no doubt that India's most assistance is very diverse in nature from supporting agriculture, civil service commission, hydroelectric lines from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, education scholarship programs, road construction and so on, but at the same time, Pakistan sees India's involvement in Afghanistan as soft power to enhance their strategic depth. Pakistanis are especially very suspicious about India's projects close to the border of Pakistan such as building Zarang- Dilaram road and some other projects in the border areas. Pakistanis were always suspicious about India's soft power projects such as scholarship programs, supporting civil service commission, while also offering military assistance and training to ANSF in the long run may increase India's influence in Afghanistan in the future.

Therefore, Pakistan has requested repeatedly from the Afghan government to allow Pakistan to support the same kind of programs of scholarship, training of ANSF and key other areas and even encourage Afghanistan to cut ties with India, and sign a strategic partnership agreement with Pakistan.[61] But the government of Afghanistan has been reluctant to send Afghan students or ANSF personnel for training to Pakistan or sign strategic partnership with Pakistan.

In July 2004, after long discussions among leadership of Afghanistan, Interior Minister Ali Ahmad Jalali visited Pakistan and agreed to send some token number of police for training to Pakistan, but Pakistan always requested more robust relationship. Even though, Afghan government was ready to have better relationship with Pakistan but due to worsening security situation in the country since 2005, Afghan government has openly blamed Pakistan for supporting and harboring Taliban. Pakistan denies Afghan government accusations and many high level meetings between Afghanistan and Pakistan took place in various countries mediated by US, UK, Turkey and other countries, but have not removed doubts between these two countries.

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[60] Track one and half annual meetings ON 'ISLAM, POLITICS AND SECURITY IN SOUTH ASIA' (Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and Bangladesh) supported by IISS-NESA; Track Two Dialogue between Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, supported by The Delhi Policy Group; and Ottawa Dialogue between Afghanistan, Pakistan and India supported by University of Ottawa, Canada.

[61] http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/south-asia/pakistan-denies-asking-afghanistan-to-snap-ties-with-india/article4562463.ece (accessed October 05, 2013)

There are many examples that some of the engagements between Afghanistan and India are based on reaction from Pakistan. In October 2011, when India and Afghanistan signed strategic agreement[62], it alarmed Pakistan because just few days before the Chairman of High Peace Council, Professor Burhanudin Rabbani, was killed by a suicide bomber at his residence in Kabul. Afghanistan stated openly that the assassination plot was planned in Pakistan.[63] Additionally, Pakistan also has asked Afghanistan to sign strategic partnership but there is no progress to date.[64] The signing of strategic agreement may had been a mere coincidence with Professor Rabbani's assassination, but Afghans perceived it as a plot originating from Pakistan. As a result, it further contributed to negative perception against Pakistan. At the same time, when security situation get tense after skirmishes between Afghanistan and Pakistan at a border post in the eastern Goshta district this year, President Karzai visited India and asked for lethal and non-lethal arms.[65] Again, many interpreted the request from India as openly hedging bets on hostile matters, such as the Durand Line, and instigating negative view against Pakistan. Even a senior Indian official told me in Kabul that the timing of President Karzai's visit is not right, but he asked for this visit to India and we should accommodate it.

Peace and reconciliation with Taliban is another sensitive issue. Pakistan is trying to keep peace and reconciliation with Taliban on top of the agenda and is open to dialogue with Afghanistan, but India is always concern about these talks, especially with Haqqani network.[66]

Pakistan sees strong relationship between Afghanistan and India against their strategic interest. There are several other unresolved issues between Afghanistan and Pakistan. They are Durand line, trade and transit, and water issues. In order to improve relationship between these two countries, there is need for serious negotiation. Pakistan could see the current scenario in Afghanistan as a golden opportunity for them to move on these contentious issues because Afghanistan government is in weak position and may accept their terms and conditions, but the key factor that may hinder this reach out is that the current Afghan government doesn't have strong support in the country to solve these issues.

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[62] http://news.outlookindia.com/items.aspx?artid=737276 (accessed October 05, 2013)

[63] http://www.khaama.com/rabbanis-assassination-plotted-in-pakistan (accessed October 05, 2013)

[64] http://www.brecorder.com/general-news/172/1166358/ (accessed October 07, 2013)

[65] http://www.indianexpress.com/news/karzais-wishlist/1119306/ (accessed October 05, 2013)

[66] http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2013-06-21/india/40118569_1_quetta-shura-taliban-haqqanis (accessed October 07, 2013)

Conclusion

There is a famous saying that you can pick your friends, but you cannot pick your neighbors. By default, each country has close and distant neighbours. One thing that all three neighbors might agree to is that the instability in Afghanistan will have adverse impact on the region. In order for all three countries to reject the status quo and improve perception, continued dialogue is the essence. Continued bloodshed in Afghanistan has impacted millions, the recent wave of terrorism causing thousands of innocent lives in Pakistan, and collective Pakistan-Indian concerns about violence in Kashmir and Baluchistan as a means to push influence will not serve either country.

A new opportunity that exists is to steer the region towards peace in the post-2014 NATO situation. While Western forces will withdraw, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India have an opportunity to seize this opportunity by opening up sincere dialogue and address even the most contentious issues such as the role of Taliban in Afghanistan, how to address border disputes, and how to shift focus on economic prosperity. If all three neighbors neglect this opportunity to restart negotiations, it will further reinforce negative perceptions and people will view each of these countries from the prism of suspicions.

Despite enormous support of international community, Why Afghanistan is still a fragile state?

If you look back to last sixteen years that what have been went wrong and what could have been done correctly, the list is very long and all stakeholders should set back and learn from the past mistakes and should stop repeating of the same mistakes.

To review some of the failed strategies and mistake have been made by all sides, after the collapse of Taliban regime in 2001, euphoria and statements of exaggeration were abundant by policy makers and practitioners in national and international media to rebuild Afghanistan. Some suggested that Afghanistan should become a model country in the region for other Islamic countries. The US and its allies suggested to have Marshall Plan for Afghanistan to build a democratic society, promote human rights and rule of law, disarm local militia, build security institutions, have better education for girls and boys, and eventually Afghanistan should become peaceful country to have a better place among the world community that threaten the world security. All of the above were right slogans at the right time and many believed inside the country too that Afghanistan would become a peaceful and progressive country.

Except few, most Afghans wholeheartedly supported the intervention of international community and the new Afghan government. Despite flaws of Bonn Agreement, people of Afghanistan accepted it as a starting point to achieve the above goals and objectives. The people of Afghanistan accepted, supported and participated in all processes of the Bonn Agreement such as Emergency Loya Jirga (ELJ) in 2002 to approve Interim Government of President Hamid Karzai, Constitutional Loya Jirga (CLJ) in 2003 was convened to approve new constitution of Afghanistan, and subsequently Afghans participated in presidential and parliamentary elections in 2004 and 2005 respectively.

The question is that why despite enormous political, economic and military support and attention of international community, Afghanistan is still a fragile state?

The main reasons are:

1. The international community ignored governance part of the Afghanistan government. Most of the warlord and criminal-predatory mafia network were empowered politically and militarily.
2. The International Community didn't address double game of Pakistan that on the one hand was partner of international community on the war on terror but on the other hand supporting and harboring Taliban.
3. Before securing Afghanistan properly, the US attention and resources diverted from Afghanistan to Iraq war and international community didn't commit enough resources and military support to achieve the goals that set in Bonn Conference in 2001. If the international community committed fraction of the resources in the outset, Afghanistan would have been a different story.
4. The international community invested a lot of economic and military resources later on but it was too late to address the security challenges.
5. When the international community paid more attention to Afghanistan, there was no clear political strategy how to deal with Pakistan, how to pressure Afghan government to improve governance and how to promote peace process.
6. The Afghan governments didn't do well and not fulfilled their obligation to work for improving governance. Instead, indirectly promoted culture of impunity and corruption.
7. With all military and political support, the international community didn't have best communication strategy to win the hearts and minds of the Afghan people.

Despite of wasting of a lot of resources and mistakes in the past 16 years, if we look to the destruction of Afghanistan after the Soviet Occupation, Civil War and during Taliban reign, much has been done in the last 16 years in all sectors of Afghanistan. Millions of Afghan refugees have returned to their country, more than 8 million children go to schools, thousands of scholarships were awarded to new young generation inside the country and also abroad, a new educated elite class emerged, security institutions were built and life expectancy elevated from 44 (2001) to 61 (2015).

But, if you compare value for dollars, very little has been achieved and Afghanistan still should be depends economically and also security wise on international community and without their support, the Afghan government could not survive. With spending/wasting hundreds of billions of dollars and the loss of

thousands of human lives, unfortunately, the current status of Afghanistan is hurting stalemate for all spectrums of Afghan society.
Ordinary Afghans and also many in the capitals of all donor countries question their governments that why after so much financial support and military engagement, Afghanistan has not been stabilized and still why the war is ongoing there after 16 years of intervention?

Why everyday tens of people lose their lives? Why people are uncertain about their future?
Why Afghanistan once again has become a center for extremism?
Why international community is not able to tackle the sources of insurgency and extremism?
Who support the insurgents and extremists in Afghanistan and for what purpose?
And why the international community support a predatory-patronage government which has been infested by networks of corrupt warlords, bureaucrats and criminals?

These are all reasonable questions especially for Afghans to ask from their government and international community. As skeptics from the very outset, I wrote an op-ed with my longtime friend Professor David Edwards in Washington Post on 16 September 2001 and wrote, we…. “must recognize that terrorism is born of political and economic despair. If we fail to take into account Afghanistan's future, as well as its past and present, Afghanistan will remain a place where terrorists can find safe haven, and all the military might in the world won't make us safe again”.
If we look back to our op-ed in 2001, the international community have made step by step the same mistakes as the Soviet Union did in 80s. The former Soviet Union, using only their military might to suppress Mujahidin insurgency and not focusing on the governance to seek people support.

If you look back to 40 years of war in Afghanistan, the main reason of continuous insurgencies are lack of good governance. The governance structure of Afghanistan has been monopolized by few warlords, criminal mafia networks, incompetent bureaucrats and few families of predatory ethnic politicians.
There has been less focus on building institutions to keep Afghanistan together and provide basic service delivery such as to provide security and address grievances of the people in rural as well as in urban areas.

After 2001, the US and international community has continued to support a government which was losing ground in the country due to corruption, bad governance and not being able to provide physical security to the people of Afghanistan. The criminal-mafia network infested in the government and

especially among the security institutions. Eventually, people lost trust on will and intention of Afghan government and international community.

Even though, Afghanistan have lost many opportunities and international community have mad many mistakes in the last 16 years, Afghanistan still not a lost war. Internally, with the government of President Ashraf Ghani it is possible to reverse the trend, improve security and provide basic governance need of the Afghan people, if the Afghan government and international community focus on good governance and building institutions and stop policy of pleasing few and empowering predatory-patronage criminal networks of warlords.

On the external front, if the US focus properly and use sticks and carrots in the right way, despites some elements of the old strategies, the new strategy of President Trump which was announced recently, possible to succeed to bring peace and stability to Afghanistan and in the region.

In Afghanistan, a Shocked Nation Again Asks Why?

April 26, 2017

On April 21, a group of 10 Taliban fighters, disguised as Afghan soldiers transporting a wounded colleague, entered the main base of the Afghan Army's 209th Corps in the northwestern city of Mazar-e-Sharif. After a five-hour rampage through the camp, as many as 140, maybe more, Afghan soldiers were dead.

The government announced a national day of mourning for a shocked nation, and the Minister of Defense and the Army Chief of Staff resigned. It was not the first such incident. Nor will it be the last.

A view of farmland between Camp Bastion and Lashkar Gah, from an Afghan National Army 215th Corps transport in Helmand Province, Afghanistan. Photo Courtesy of the New York Times/Adam Ferguson

The question is why. Is it a problem of leadership in the Afghan National Security Forces? Is the counter-insurgency strategy itself failing?

After more than 15 years, thousands of souls lost in the fighting on all sides, and the expenditure of $800 billion by one estimate, why have the Taliban not been defeated? Moreover, how can it be that yet another militant group, the so-called Islamic State, is now sowing terror in Afghanistan?

The confusion and mistakes date to the beginning of the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on New York and Washington. The military plan to overthrow the Taliban didn't come with a political strategy to help establish a viable replacement with good governance, rule of law and sustainable development. U.S. policymakers at the time thought of those concepts as "nation building" and preferred to limit their involvement in Afghanistan to countering terrorism instead.

In 2010, I posed a challenge to a senior member of the U.S.- and NATO-led coalition: If, in your strategy to eliminate terrorism in Afghanistan, your list of militants that you have captured or killed has decreased since 2001, that means you are succeeding. If, on the other hand, your captured-or-killed list increased, it means your policy has failed.

Today, I would pose a different question to the Afghan government and the coalition. If your policy is the same now as it has been in the last 15 years, how do you expect to win the war against terror in Afghanistan with fewer soldiers and less financial support? Because if the same policy didn't succeed with 150,000 NATO forces, it certainly is not possible for it to succeed now.

There is no doubt that weak leadership and corruption is endemic in Afghanistan. But these also illustrate the lack of a political strategy to improve governance and deal with problems at their roots.

Afghanistan's people and their institutions face serious external as well as internal threats, and each must be confronted to stop the bloodshed—and the waste of resources. The international community needs to engage seriously with Pakistan to end all support of the Taliban and other terrorist groups and stop harboring them as strategic tools in regional power struggles. All sides—including Pakistan—suffer from the double game.

Within Afghanistan, the current government of President Ashraf Ghani must end its practice of centralizing all authority in the presidential palace.

It is impossible for any single leader to be directly involved in recruitment of all personnel and overseeing all procurement, monitoring and implementation of every policy.

The President must delegate authority to his ministries and to the provincial and district governors. The way to balance responsibility and authority should be to provide clear overall direction and hold appointed officials accountable for their actions and results. But if the engine (the system) is broken, changing drivers over and over won't help.

In Afghanistan, Time for a Message More Powerful than a Bomb

Even in Afghanistan, a country that has seen four decades of bloodshed and destruction, the ravages of a relatively small contingent of the so-called "Islamic State" extremist group have been shocking: Men, women and children beheaded, individuals blown up with explosives strapped to their bodies, children indoctrinated to commit atrocities. So the U.S. military's "Mother of All Bombs" dropped onto a remote warren of ISIS tunnels and caves was welcomed in some quarters. But there is more that the Afghan government and the U.S. can do to reduce the frustration and despair that drives so many, especially the young, into the radical fold.

Afghan children stretch before soccer game in 2007 with troops working to improve governance. Following the April 13 bombing in Nangarhar, Miakhel writes that improving governance is still the most effective approach against violence. Flickr/St Sgt Jasper

The April 13 U.S. strike with a GBU-43 Massive Ordinance Air Blast (MOAB) device, nicknamed the "Mother of All Bombs," was the first combat use of the military's biggest non-nuclear bomb, and drew attention to the small but stubborn presence of ISIS in Afghanistan.

Some research has put the number of ISIS fighters in Afghanistan as high as 8,500 in early 2016. But a combination of Taliban offensives and U.S. military drone strikes have decimated ISIS ranks to possible around 700. The Taliban, on the other hand, has an estimated 40,000 fighters who control one third of the country.

Local leaders I've spoken with since the MOAB bombing confirmed U.S. government accounts that no civilians appear to have been killed. As I spoke with acquaintances in the area of the bombing in the Achin district of Nangarhar Province, I repeatedly heard a similar message: The U.S. military should use the mother, father and sons of all bombs, if that's what it takes to get rid of ISIS in the area and enable residents to return to their homes. But the presence of ISIS is closely connected with the ongoing Taliban insurgency against the Afghan government. ISIS exploited local grievances and took advantage of weak local governance to establish a foothold.

After the bombing, some Afghans expressed disdain that the U.S. appears to be escalating its military activities to address what is really a larger political struggle. Former Afghan President Hamid Karzai accused the U.S. of using Afghanistan as a weapons testing ground.

To provide reassurance, the Afghan government and the U.S. should share evidence with the population as soon as possible that the MOAB had a significant effect against ISIS while also avoiding civilian casualties. And the U.S. should move quickly on its Afghanistan strategy review and assure Afghan leaders and their neighbors that it takes the region's future seriously and will stay engaged.

To move back on track, the US should focus on how best to calibrate a political strategy that helps the Afghan government win popular support to negotiate a sustainable peace. That will send a message to the Afghan people more spectacular than any bomb.

How Afghans View the New U.S. Strategy, Trump Plan Spurs Hope, But Poses Tests

August 24, 2017

Afghanistan's leaders are mostly breathing a sigh of relief at the release of the new U.S. strategy after such a long delay. President Trump's speech featured important reassurances to Afghanistan and some useful warnings all around. But it also leaves questions about the difficulty of reaching the goals that both the Afghan and U.S. governments have set out. An

Figure 1Afghan Policeman stands watch at his unit's small hilltop outpost overlooking the districts north of the provincial capital of Farah in Afghanistan, April 2017. Photo Courtesy of The New York Times/Bryan Denton

President Trump mentioned important elements for winning the war: he warned the Taliban that they cannot win on the battlefield and should instead pursue a peace process with the Afghan government; he cautioned Pakistan that the U.S. cannot tolerate a double game of trying to be a U.S. partner while supporting terrorist groups that attack American forces next door; and he sent a strong message to the Afghan government that the U.S. insists on stronger action against corruption and for better governance.

The plan also makes clear that the U.S. will not repeat the mistake it made in Iraq by withdrawing prematurely from Afghanistan and allowing it to become a haven for terrorist groups that would target the U.S. and its allies.

Many in Afghanistan, including President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Officer Abdullah Abdullah, are pleased with the new U.S. strategy and support it. Many feared that a U.S. withdrawal would leave a vacuum that would be filled by civil war and proxy conflicts among internal and regional powers, as happened after the withdrawal of the Soviet Union in 1989.

But the plan poses at least two big questions: What if Pakistan doesn't change its policy and continues supporting the Taliban and other terrorist groups in the region? And what if the Afghan government can't fulfill its—and the U.S.—goals of reducing corruption and improving governance?

Without more details on the military strategy, many still worry that Pakistan's military or civilian leaders may continue supporting the Taliban and Haqqani networks in Afghanistan as a hedge against their concern of being surrounded by hostile powers. If they test American intentions, the fighting in Afghanistan might intensify in the short term.

But if the U.S. demonstrates determination with Pakistan and successfully helps Afghan forces turn back the Taliban, Pakistan might finally conclude that it cannot afford the heavy price of its policy over the long term. That might, in turn, persuade the Taliban and its backers to pursue a negotiated settlement.
Another challenge is how the Afghan government can take the risky but courageous steps needed to fight corruption and improve governance, while still keeping the National Unity Government intact. So far, President Ghani has opted to avoid the potential backlash of tough decisions.

As President Trump noted, eventually it is up to the Afghans how to govern. But the imperative to support President Ghani on governance and on accountability for those who abuse their power is just as important as backing the fight against the 20 U.S.-designated foreign terrorist groups that the U.S. has tallied as operating in Afghanistan and Pakistan.
It should be obvious that, after so many years of enormous human and capital losses, failure in Afghanistan is not in the interest of Afghans, their neighbors or the international community. It is in the interest of all stakeholders in Afghanistan to open a new page of cooperation and try to succeed, to stop bloodshed in Afghanistan future attacks in the U.S. and also elsewhere in the world.

Asymmetric War: Case study, Afghanistan

Introduction and methodology of research

Asymmetric warfare has a long history dating back to ancient times, as exemplified by Sun Tzu's strategies outlined in 500 BC. He wrote, '*If the enemy is superior in strength, evade him. If his forces are united, separate them. Attack him where he is unprepared. Appear where you are not expected*.[67]"
This paper's research methodology primarily relies on a literature review and my personal experience gained from reporting and writing about asymmetric warfare. My background includes work as a reporter for the Voice of America in the 1980s and collaborative research with American Anthropologist Professor David Edwards. Together, we conducted numerous interviews with key commanders and religious networks in Peshawar, Pakistan, during the 1980s.

Professor Edwards authored several books, including "Heroes of the Age: Moral Fault Lines on the Afghan Frontier," [68] "Before Taliban: Genealogies of the Afghan Jihad,"[69] and "Caravan of Martyrs: Sacrifice and Suicide Bombing in Afghanistan,"[70] in which he acknowledges my contributions to his research.

Additionally, Afghanistan's history is marked by instances of asymmetric warfare, such as the Anglo-Afghan wars against British forces in 1842, 1879, and

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[67] Miles, Franklin, Asymmetric Warfare: An Historical Perspective, US Army War College, March, 1999 https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=439201 (last accessed 15 August 2015)
[68] Edwards, David, Heroes of the Age: Moral Fault Lines on the Afghan Frontier http://www.ucpress.edu/book.php?isbn=9780520200647 (last accessed 15 August 2015)
[69] Edwards, David, Before Taliban: Genealogies of the Afghan Jihad http://www.ucpress.edu/book.php?isbn=9780520228610 (last accessed 15 August 2015)
[70] Edwards, David, Caravan of Martyrs: Sacrifice and Suicide Bombing in Afghanistan, University of California Press, 2019 https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520303461/caravan-of-martyrs (last access 30 March 2024)

1919. However, modern asymmetric warfare against governments, invaders, and occupiers gained momentum after President Mohammad Daud's coup in 1973.

I personally witnessed significant events, including the Muslim Youth Organization's attack in Laghman province in 1975, the communist coup in Kabul in 1978, and subsequently, the Mujahidin uprising against the communist regime in Kunar province . My firsthand experiences culminated in the publication of a book titled "In Light of the Truth" in Pashto language in 2007, narrating the Mujahidin uprising and refugee life in Pakistan [71] .

The paper delves into the evolution of asymmetric warfare in Afghanistan, linking it to the rise of al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and more recently, ISIS in Afghanistan. It also discusses my experiences as Deputy Minister of Interior from 2003-2005, Governor of Nangarhar province (2019-2020), First Deputy/Acting Minister of Defense (2020-2021), working for UN, United States Institute of Peace and provides insights into the governance and security situation through a numbers of published articles in English [72] .

In conclusion, this paper presents firsthand observations and a chronological account of the evolution of asymmetric warfare in Afghanistan since the 1973 coup, shedding light on organizations like the Muslim Youth Organization and summarizing key developments.

[71] Miakhel, Shahmahmood, In light of the Truth, published by Pir Printing, Kabul, Afghanistan (2007).

[72] Miakhel, Shahmahmood, Understanding Afghanistan: Collection of Published Articles (2001-2012), published by Bilal Printing Company in 2012, Kabul Afghanistan (2012).

Emergence of Muslim Youth Movement (Jawanan Musulman) at Kabul University in the 1960s and Its Reasons behind

The establishment of political parties and groups was not deeply rooted in Afghanistan's history. The first pro-democracy movement began in 1906 during King Habibullah Khan's reign, aiming for a constitutional monarchy, which was realized in 1964[73]. This period marked a democratization phase in Afghanistan, allowing political parties to form despite the absence of formal approval from the king.

During this democratization era, the Muslim Youth Movement (MYO) which also called Jawanan Musulman emerged in opposition to communist parties. Inspired by professors educated at Al-Azhar University in Egypt with knowledge of the Islamic Brotherhood. The MYO recruited members from educational institutions, notably Kabul University. Many prominent Afghan leaders, including Professor Rabbani of Jamiat-e-Islami, Gulbudin Hekmatyar of Hezb-e-Islami, Professor Abdul Rab Rasool Sayyaf of Itehad-e-Islami, Professor Sebghatullah Mujadedi of National Front of Afghanistan and the Commander Ahmad Shah Masood of the Northern Alliance, were associated with this movement.

The proliferation of political parties stemmed from the Cold War dynamics and Afghanistan's societal backwardness, prompting demands for political change. Various elites and parties criticized the king for regressive policies, advocating for an end to monarchy. However, external influences and ideological divides, such as leftist of party of People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), Parcham (Banner) faction of PDPA, Shula-e-Jawid (pro-China communist party) and extremist right groups like MYO hindered the development of moderate mainstream parties aligned with public sentiments.

During a meeting in 1990 in Virginia, USA, Dr. Abdul Qayum a former minister during King Mohammed Zahir's reign, acknowledged the king's inhibiting stance on organized moderate elite groups, fearing they could threaten the monarchy. However, the actual threat arose from leftist and extremist factions, while moderate voices struggled to gain traction.

The MYO split into Hezb-e-Islami and Jamiate-e-Islami, led by Hekmatyar and Rabbani, respectively, further exemplified ideological differences. The Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) of Pakistan supported and trained these militant groups to conduct asymmetric warfare against President Daud's government in Afghanistan in 1975. Gulbudin Hekmatyar of Hezb-e-Islami and Ahmad Shah Masood of Jamiate-e-Islam were leader of those attacks in Panjshir, Kunar,

[73] http://www.ariaye.com/dari/mashrotah.html (last accessed 16 August 2015)

Nangarhar and Paktia provinces. This support stemmed from Pakistan's concerns about Afghanistan's Pakhtunistan cause and its relations with India.

Despite these efforts, Pakistan's attempts to destabilize Afghanistan were not fully successful until the communist coup in 1978, partly due to Afghan migration to Pakistan and internal Afghan political dynamics.

The 1973 Coup and the Emergence of Armed Struggle Against the Regime (1975) with Pakistan's Role

In 1973, President Mohammad Daud overthrew King Zahir Shah's regime with the support of the leftist Parcham faction of PDPA. The Muslim Youth Organization opposed Daud's regime and attempted to mobilize people against it. When the regime's Planning Minister, Ali Ahmad Khurram, was assassinated in Kabul in 1977, President Daud's government blamed the Muslim Youth Organization for the attack and initiated a crackdown by arresting many of its members. Despite this, some senior leaders of the organization managed to escape to Pakistan.

During this period, Afghanistan's relationship with Pakistan was strained due to border disputes. Pakistan, in response, trained and armed members of the Muslim Youth Organization to launch asymmetric warfare within Afghanistan. At the time, I was in the 11th grade in Laghman province. In 1975, a group of 27 members of Hezb-e-Islam, led by Moulavi Habib-ur-Rahman, launched an attack on the provincial capital, resulting in the death of the deputy police chief and several police officers guarding the national bank branch. Although the group failed to capture the province and fled when government reinforcements arrived, it caused significant disruption.

The governor of Laghman province, Abdul Qadir Qazi, managed to escape, and General Mohammad Younus, the military commander of the 11th Division in Nangarhar province, urged locals to cooperate in apprehending the attackers, emphasizing that they were not outsiders but local citizens. The leader of the group, Moulavi Habib-ur-Rahman, was captured in Chardehi village by a local leader named Malik Habib and handed over to the government. Only two members of the group escaped; the rest were arrested by locals. These events are detailed in my book, "In the Light of Truth," written in Pashto.
In 1975, members of MYO, lead by Ahmad Shah Masood, also attacked government position in Panjshir Valley but failed. The Muslim Youth Organization attempted similar tactics in other regions like Shegal valley in Asmar district of Kunar province, Surkhrud district in Nangarhar, and Paktika province. However, these attempts failed, leading to the arrest of many organization members.
The key lesson here is that asymmetric warfare's success depends on having a safe haven outside the country and favorable internal conditions for hiding

among the population. During this period, Afghanistan's people largely supported the government, making it difficult for such groups to operate effectively within the country.

The situation changed dramatically after the 1978 coup, which saw the communist regime oppressively targeting and killing thousands without trial. This led to mass migration to Pakistan, providing Pakistan with an opportunity to support anti-government elements. The resistance against the regime, led by mujahidin or freedom fighters, gained momentum. The Mujahidin's strength lay in their ability to wage asymmetric warfare, supported by internal popular support against the communist regime and external safe havens in Iran and Pakistan. They also received backing from Western and Muslim countries, ultimately leading to the collapse of the communist regime in 1992 and a victory for the mujahidin.

The 1978 Communist Coup and Ideological Differences with Traditional Afghan Society

On April 17, 1978, Mir Akbar Khyber, a senior PDPA member, was assassinated in Kabul. The PDPA blamed President Daud's government for the killing and used it as a pretext to escalate opposition.

I vividly recall the funeral procession for Khyber on April 25, 1978, as a student at Kabul University. It marked the first open protest against the regime during my time there. Thousands participated, chanting anti-US and anti-government slogans. PDPA leaders like Noor Mohammad Taraki and Babrak Karmal spoke critically of the government, with Taraki ominously stating that Khyber's blood would be avenged with more blood.

In 1977, Daud Khan's overtures to the West strained relations with the Soviets, who feared Afghanistan might align with the West. The Soviets coerced a reunion of PDPA factions, sensing Afghanistan's potential shift towards communism.

Following Khyber's funeral, President Daud cracked down on the PDPA, leading to arrests of senior leaders. Hafizullah Amin, with ties to the military, orchestrated a coup against Daud's regime, believed by many to be influenced by the KGB.

The communist coup on April 27, 1978, witnessed clashes around the Presidential Palace. Pro-PDPA forces seized control and announced the coup. The next day, PDPA jets bombed the Presidential and Darul Aman Palaces, killing President Daud and his family.

The new communist regime swiftly implemented radical reforms, altering

Afghanistan's flag, initiating land reforms, and imposing restrictions on women dowry. These changes clashed with traditional Afghan values, leading to opposition and asymmetric warfare across the country.

Exodus of Afghan Refugees to Pakistan and Support for Resistance Against the Communist Regime

After the 1978 communist coup in Afghanistan, asymmetric warfare erupted, with the Mujahideen receiving training and support from Pakistan's ISI and financial backing from Western and Arab nations. The communist regime's popularity waned, and Mujahideen strength grew steadily.

Although my family wasn't affiliated with any Mujahideen groups, my father faced arrest due to his previous roles under President Daud and King Zahir Shah's regimes. Fearing arrest, he escaped to the mountains and mobilized anti-regime efforts. Employing Sun Tzu's tactics of attacking where unexpected and creating chaos, he led successful resistance in Khas Kunar district without blood shedding. Just asked people not to cooperate with the government.

In asymmetric warfare, numerical superiority doesn't guarantee victory; it's the tactics that pose challenges to regular armies. For instance, one day in the winter of 1979, my father, with just 11 individuals, strategically conducted Friday prayers in our district's center, rallying support without violence. This peaceful yet impactful approach led to widespread support for the Mujahideen in the district. The local government lost control of a half district.

As asymmetric warfare intensified across Afghanistan, the communist regime and later Soviet forces resorted to heavy weaponry and bombardments against small Mujahideen targets. This onslaught forced millions of Afghans to seek refuge in Pakistan, where refugee camps became recruitment hubs for young fighters.

My family settled in the Kacha Garhi refugee camp near Peshawar, where many unemployed or school-aged Afghans were drawn to the adventure of fighting in Afghanistan. Despite Soviet attempts to depopulate border areas to deny Mujahideen safe havens, Western support ensured a steady supply of funds and arms, sustaining the resistance movement.

The refugee camps became pivotal in fueling the Mujahideen's struggle, highlighting the global nature of support against the communist regime in Afghanistan.

Formation of Mujahideen Resistance Groups and Armed Struggle Against the Communist Regime

The Muslim Youth Organization groups, already established in Pakistan and supported by ISI during President Daud's regime, were reorganized into Mujahideen political parties. Pakistan allowed the emergence of numerous parties along ethnic and ideological lines. Over time, seven parties gained prominence:

1. Hezb-e-Islami of Afghanistan (Islamic Party of Afghanistan) led by Gulbudin Hekmatyar
2. Jamiat-e-Islami Afghanistan (Islamic Society of Afghanistan) led by Professor Burhanudin Rabbani
3. Hezb-e-Islami of Afghanistan Khalis (Islamic Party of Afghanistan Khalis group) led by Moulavi Mohammad Younus Khalis
4. Ittehad-e-Islami Afghanistan (Islamic Unity of Afghanistan) led by Professor Abdur Rab Rasul Sayyaf
5. Harakat-e-Inqilab Islami Afghanistan (Islamic Movement of Afghanistan) led by Moulavi Mohammad NabiMohammadi
6. Jabha-e-Nijat Milli Afghanistan (National Liberation Front) led by Professor Sebghatullah Mujadedi
7. Mahaz-e-Mili Islami of Afghanistan (Afghanistan National Islamic Front) led by Pir Sayed Ahmad Gilani

These parties, categorized into fundamentalist and moderate groups, received support from Pakistan, Arab nations, and Western countries, with more resources allocated to the fundamentalist factions. This support was strategic, aiming to ensure diverse representation and prevent the regime from striking deals with a single group, thereby sustaining the insurgency.

The millions of Afghan refugees and ongoing support for the Mujahideen bolstered these parties' legitimacy internationally. Creating a narrative of legitimacy was crucial for sustaining the resistance against the Soviet-backed regime. However, while this tactic contributed to defeating the Soviet Union, it later led to disastrous consequences for Afghanistan.

The Impact of Arab Involvement in the Afghan resistance and the indoctrination of young Afghans in madrasas (religious schools) in Pakistan

In the 1980s, Afghanistan's Mujahideen received support from Gulf countries and numerous Arabs, including Osama Bin Laden and his mentor Abdullah Azam, who visited Afghanistan to participate in Jihad against the Soviet Union. Abdullah Azam is often referred to as the father of Global Jihadi groups[74]. These Arabs brought substantial funds and established many madrassas (religious schools) in refugee camps, where they trained alongside Afghan Mujahideen under Pakistan's military intelligence agency, ISI, engaging in armed asymmetric warfare within Afghanistan.

The Arabs who funded and supported religious schools in Afghan refugee camps adhered to the Wahhabi sect of Islam, while the majority of Afghans were Sunni Muslims. Meanwhile, eight separate Shia groups of Mujahideen received support from Iran. Refugees sought assistance and desired religious education for their children, with Arabs offering material incentives and free tuition for religious studies. However, Afghan refugees were unaware of the Arabs' covert agenda for indoctrinating their children. An elder named Malik Nazir[75] from Nasir Bagh refugee camp once in a big gathering expressed their dilemma, stating, "We don't know what to do with our children. In Afghanistan, we sent our children to school and they became communists. And in Pakistan, we sent them to Madrassas and they became Wahhabis."

The Wahhabi-indoctrinated young Afghans became militant and connected with other extremist networks across Muslim countries, perpetuating asymmetric warfare against their own government. Today, many individuals leading asymmetric warfare in countries like Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen, and elsewhere have ties to training received in Afghanistan during the 1980s through Pakistan's ISI. Pakistan's military also utilized these extremist elements in Kashmir and Afghanistan as part of their strategic depth policy against India and in the region.

By the 1990s, approximately thirty thousand Arabs from various countries were fighting in Afghanistan. In Nangarhar province, they initiated the first line of resistance in the Surkh Dewal area against the Kabul regime. After the Soviet forces' withdrawal in 1989 and the collapse of the last communist regime in 1992, many of these Arabs returned to their countries and established militant cells against their regimes and Western interests. Osama Bin Laden and his deputy Ayman Al-Zawahiri formed the nucleus of al-Qaeda after the Soviet withdrawal, maintaining contact with a decentralized network of al-Qaeda in numerous Arab countries[76]. Bin Laden relocated to Sudan in the 1990s before

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[74] http://www.iacsp.com/itobli3.html (last accessed 21 August 2015)

[75] Malik Nazir was head of Provincial High Peace Council in Nangarhar province.

[76] http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/al-qaida-background.htm (last accessed 21 August 2015)

returning to Afghanistan, affiliating with the Taliban in 1996 after their capture of Kabul.

Bin Laden pledged allegiance to the Taliban leadership, providing substantial financial assistance. Simultaneously, he and other al-Qaeda members plotted attacks on US interests in the Gulf countries and globally, including within the United States. Bin Laden remained in Afghanistan until the US toppled the Taliban regime in 2001. He was later killed near Islamabad on May 2, 2011, by a US Navy SEAL team[77]. Since then, the Taliban and al-Qaeda have continued their asymmetric attacks against the Kabul regime and US forces in Afghanistan. Over the course of the 20-year Taliban insurgency against the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, thousands of civilians, Afghan forces, NATO, and US forces have lost their lives. The cost of asymmetric warfare in Afghanistan has exceeded two trillion dollars [78].

The collapse of communist regime and the victory of the Mujahidin in 1992

In 1992, Afghanistan witnessed the collapse of Dr. Najibullah's communist regime after 14 years of asymmetric warfare. The Mujahideen successfully defeated the communist regime and Soviet forces in Afghanistan, but the toll of asymmetric warfare was devastating for all involved. While exact statistics are unavailable, it is estimated that over seven million individuals became refugees in Pakistan, Iran, and other parts of the world, with approximately two million people losing their lives. Virtually every Afghan family experienced internal displacement or immigration to other countries, resulting in profound loss and displacement of loved ones. Tragically, two of my own brothers fell victim to this war.

The entire country was left in ruins, resembling a ghost nation, as vital infrastructure like factories, roads, schools, universities, and clinics lay destroyed. Afghanistan suffered a significant loss in human capital, with a whole generation impacted by the conflict. The Mujahideen factions, initially supported for their role in asymmetric warfare, were ill-prepared for governance. In fighting erupted among these groups as they vied for greater control within the new coalition government.

The international community's support dwindled as the Cold War ended, and Afghanistan lost its strategic importance on the global stage. This abandonment left Afghanistan vulnerable to regional power struggles and proxy wars

[77] https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2011/05/02/osama-bin-laden-dead (last accessed April 15, 2024)

[78] https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/figures/2021/human-and-budgetary-costs-date-us-war-afghanistan-2001-2022 (last accessed April 15, 2024)

that have persisted for the past twenty-three years since the collapse of the Taliban regime.

The onset of the Civil War (1992-1996) and role of Arabs, particularly Osama bin Laden return to Afghanistan

The Civil War in Afghanistan spanned from 1992 to 1996, following the formation of the first Mujahideen government based on the coalition arrangement of the Peshawar Accord. This government, established in April 1992, aimed to fill the political vacuum in Kabul. Initially, Professor Sebghatullah Mujadedi, leader of the National Liberation Front, assumed the presidency for three months before being succeeded by Professor Burhanuddin Rabbani, leader of Jamiat-e-Islami. Concurrently, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, leader of Hezb-e-Islami, was appointed as Prime Minister. The primary rivalry emerged between Defense Minister Ahmad Shah Masood, leader of the Northern Alliance, and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

Intense fighting erupted in Kabul in May 1992[79], continuing for four years as factions clashed. The city suffered extensive destruction, with UN statistics indicating approximately 60,000 innocent citizens killed and half a million displaced [80].

During the Soviet war from 1979 to 1989, Osama Bin Laden raised funds and provided heavy machinery to anti-communist Mujahideen fighters. He also financed the Services Office, which recruited and trained foreign Muslim militants to fight alongside Afghan Mujahideen. Following his return to Saudi Arabia in 1989, Bin Laden criticized the Saudi monarchy, leading to virtual house arrest in 1991 and subsequent exile in 1994 after the Saudi government revoked his citizenship and froze his assets.

Bin Laden then settled in Sudan, establishing businesses and al-Qaeda training camps. Pressure from the US and Saudi Arabia compelled him to leave Sudan in 1996. During this period, the US aimed to keep Bin Laden elusive rather than capture him. Bin Laden moved to Afghanistan at the invitation of Mujahideen leaders and pledged allegiance to Taliban leader Mullah Omar in 1996. He offered financial support to the Taliban in exchange for a base.

After the 1998 bombings of US embassies in Tanzania and Kenya, Saudi Arabia pressured the Taliban to hand over Bin Laden, leading to strained relations

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[79] http://www.hrw.org/reports/2005/afghanistan0605/4.htm (last accessed 21 August 2015)

[80] Miakhel, S. Shahmahmood, Human Security and Rule of Law, Afghanistan Experience, chapter of a book titled: The Rule of Law in Afghanistan: Missing in Action, edited by Whit Mason and published by Cambridge University Press in 2011

and a diplomatic fallout [81] .

The rise of the Taliban and the downfall of the Mujahidin regime (1994-1996)

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan once remarked, "The United Nations has learned that the rule of law is not a luxury, and that justice is not a side issue. We have seen people lose faith in the peace process when they do not feel safe from crime. We have seen that without a credible machinery to enforce the law and resolve disputes, people resort to violence and illegal means. And we have seen that elections held when the rule of law is too fragile seldom lead to lasting democratic governance...but a one-size-fits-all approach does not work. Local actors must be involved from the start. The aim is to leave behind strong local institutions when we depart. [82] "

The rise of the Taliban stemmed from the power vacuum following the collapse of Dr. Najibullah's regime in 1992. Mujahideen groups, based in Iran and Pakistan, engaged in internal strife for control over Afghanistan. The UN reported that between May and August 1992, 1,800 civilians perished in rocket attacks in Kabul, leading to 500,000 fleeing the city. Estimates suggest that between 1992 and 1996, over 60,000 lost their lives in Kabul alone, with 80% of the city reduced to ruins.

Throughout Afghanistan, warlords backed by neighboring countries acted with impunity, creating lawless territories ruled by brutality. The safety of ordinary Afghans was compromised, with rampant violence, rapes, mass killings, and other atrocities occurring. Traveling within Afghanistan became perilous, encountering numerous checkpoints controlled by various factions, each posing its own threat.

Regrettably, the international community, once supportive of Afghanistan's Jihad against the Soviets, turned a blind eye to post-Jihad Afghanistan, leaving its fate to neighboring powers. Proxy wars ensued as neighbors supported different factions for their interests, plunging Afghanistan deeper into chaos.

Amid this turmoil, the Taliban emerged as a response to widespread desire for stability. They promised to dismantle the forces causing chaos and misery. Initially, many Afghans welcomed the Taliban's efforts to disarm warlords and

[81] http://www.cfr.org/terrorist-leaders/profile-osama-bin-laden/p9951 (last accessed 21 August 2015)

[82] Kofi Annan, 25 September 2005, General Assembly

restore security [83] .

The Taliban swiftly gained control over 95% of Afghanistan, including the capital, Kabul. They established security, allowing relatively safe travel, albeit with a restrictive agenda. However, their rule brought new challenges, such as fostering the growth of poppy and drug industries, harboring al-Qaeda, exacerbating poverty, and severely limiting education, especially for women and girls, by transforming schools into Madrasas focused solely on Islamic subjects.

For a deeper understanding of the Taliban's emergence and support, Ahmad Rashid's book "Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil, and Fundamentalism in Central Asia" provides valuable insights.

The reasons for the collaboration between the Taliban and al-Qaeda leader, Osama bin Laden

The collaboration between the Taliban and al-Qaeda, despite their ideological differences, was driven by mutual interests. The Taliban sought Osama Bin Laden's financial support, which he received from Gulf Sheikhs. At that time, the Taliban regime lacked international recognition, with only Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates acknowledging it.

Before the Taliban captured Jalalabad city, there was no significant connection between them and al-Qaeda. The Taliban were primarily Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi sect, predominantly Pashtuns, while al-Qaeda members followed Wahhabi or Ahle-Hadith ideologies. Al-Qaeda initially had closer ties to fundamentalist Mujahideen groups based in Peshawar [84] .

The relationship between the Taliban and al-Qaeda strengthened after the Taliban's capture of Jalalabad. By the end of Taliban rule, their leadership in Kandahar had developed a close association with Osama Bin Laden. Afghanistan was effectively occupied by these Arab and jihadist elements, with the full support of the Taliban.

Why did al-Qaeda establish itself in Afghanistan? Firstly, they sought a lawless environment where they could operate freely without oversight. Afghanistan, under the Taliban, provided such an environment conducive to their global operations. This choice was also influenced by factors such as the lack of a

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[83] Miakhel, Shahmahmood paper, Challenges and dilemmas of reconstruction and institution-building: social, economic and political factors Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad Institute for Asian Studies
18-19 March 2009 New Delhi, India.

[84] ibid

controlling regime and rampant anarchy.

It's worth noting that these Arab and jihadist elements largely remained separate from the local population, maintaining close ties primarily with the top leadership of Mujahideen and the Taliban. They lived in isolated areas with their own training centers, limiting their influence among the Afghan populace compared to their foothold in Pakistan. Al-Qaeda had longstanding links with political extremist groups in Pakistan and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), contributing to their presence and activities in that region.

Following the collapse of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in 2001, most al-Qaeda members and senior Taliban leaders were apprehended in Pakistan rather than Afghanistan.

The rule of Taliban and the frustration of the people of Afghanistan

During the civil war from 1992 to 1994, Afghans experienced grave insecurity and instability, both in Kabul and across provinces. Consequently, they initially welcomed the Taliban movement for its four primary agendas:

1. Disarming warlords
2. Ensuring national security
3. Centralizing authority
4. Improving daily life opportunities for Afghans

The Taliban acted decisively to disarm warlords and establish security, consolidating their power with centralized authority. I personally engaged with Taliban leadership in Khost province in 1995 as part of a UN delegation. Our discussions with Qari Salam, a Taliban leader, revealed their initial uncertainty about governance but a willingness to allow educated individuals to manage government affairs once they solidified their power. However, as they gained control, their governance agenda became less inclusive.

Upon capturing Kabul, the Taliban failed to develop a comprehensive governance strategy. Instead, they filled administrative positions with their own clerics, leading to increased poppy cultivation and widespread deprivation among the populace. Their implementation of harsh rules, such as restricting women from education and government employment, along with enforcing strict grooming standards, exacerbated public dissatisfaction.

After enduring four years of Taliban rule, the Afghan people grew weary of their governance model and yearned for positive change. In a 2001 interview with

the Berkshire New Paper[85] in the US, I emphasized the critical importance of education for Afghanistan's recovery. I advocated for inclusive political restructuring, especially regarding women's roles, considering the Taliban's oppressive policies towards women. Improving education, healthcare, and nutrition for all Afghans, not just indoctrination, was essential for the nation's progress.

The war waged by Al-Qaeda against the West and the September 11, 2001 attack on the US

I vividly remember the tragic events of September 11, 2001. At the time, I was at the immigration office in Arlington, VA, USA, just a few miles away from the Pentagon when the tragic events of September 11 unfolded. A friend, who was a lawyer in the immigration office, wanted to deposit some fees and told me that something had happened in DC and NY, and they might close the office. A few minutes later, an immigration officer came and told the customers to leave the building as they didn't know the details but needed to close the office.

When I left the office and got to my car, I turned on the radio and learned that passenger planes had hit the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon, and one other plane was missing. Eventually, the next plane hit in Pennsylvania. It took me several hours to reach my home, which was about a 30-minute drive from the immigration office in Arlington. When I reached home, I was glued to the TV, watching the disaster unfold and hearing about al-Qaeda and Bin Laden's involvement in planning the attack. As an Afghan-American, I was concerned about how many Afghans might be involved. In the end, we found out that no Afghans were among the attackers.

The comments below are quoted mostly from the Council on Foreign Relations website.

"In the 1980s, bin Laden disdained America for its alliances with Israel and moderate Muslim states, but it was the Gulf crisis that crystallized his hatred. When Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, bin Laden wanted Arab veterans of the Afghan war to help the Saudi army defend Saudi Arabia. He saw the arrival of American troops to confront Saddam—and the continued U.S. military presence in the Gulf after the war—as a violation of the sanctity of Muslim territory. In 1996, Osama Bin Laden said, 'Due to the imbalance of power between our armed forces and the enemy forces,' he wrote, 'a suitable means of fighting must be adopted, i.e., using fast-moving, light forces that work under complete secrecy.'

[85] http://www.iberkshires.com/story/3659/Williams-expert-on-Afghanistan-has-spent-last-two-months-in-a-whirlwind.html (last accessed 22 August 2015)

In several ways, including military strikes, diplomacy, legal action, and intelligence work, the United States used diplomatic pressure and the threat of UN sanctions to get Sudan to expel bin Laden in 1996.

For several years, the CIA paid agents in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Uzbekistan to monitor bin Laden's movements; after the 1998 bombing of two U.S. embassies in East Africa, the United States used cruise missiles to hit his Afghan bases. Also in 1998, a federal grand jury indicted bin Laden and twenty-one other Al-Qaeda members for conspiring to kill Americans abroad; four men were convicted in May of 2001.

Many in the Arab world were dubious, but investigators have found financial records, communications among Al-Qaeda members, and other evidence linking bin Laden to the September 11 attacks. Moreover, Bin Laden and other Al-Qaeda operatives have effectively claimed responsibility for the attacks. In a videotape recorded in Afghanistan in November 2001, bin Laden celebrated the strikes on the World Trade Center. 'We had notification since the previous Thursday that the event would take place that day,' he said. 'We calculated in advance the number of casualties.' In another tape released in April 2002, bin Laden and one of his top deputies were shown kneeling to praise their 'great victory' on September 11." [86]

Asymmetric warfare was not a new concept in world history, but after September 11, it took on a new shape and became a global war. Even though it was a global war, the methods and tactics of fighting were not right, and the world community has still not addressed the root causes of it. We have a saying in Afghanistan that you cannot kill mosquitoes with artillery. The world community responded to individual members of al-Qaeda with large operations. In the end, instead of eliminating one individual, they created more mosquito nests, and trillions of dollars and hundreds of thousands of human lives were lost in different parts of the world, facing a more violent world than about 23 years ago when the war on global terrorism started. With this small introduction, I will focus on the main topic of this paper, "Asymmetric War."

Terrorism is one of the most difficult and controversial terms for political scientists to define because one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter. Also, some states are supporting terroristic groups for their strategic objectives. For example, in the case of Afghanistan, two neighbors, Iran and Pakistan, support the Taliban as part of their strategic interest to upset their arch rivals like India and the United States in the region. Iran supports different proxies in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. Another important issue is the double standard approach of the international community

[86] http://www.cfr.org/terrorist-leaders/profile-osama-bin-laden/p9951#p2 (last accessed 22 August 2015)

regarding the war on terrorism in different parts of the world.

Terrorism is a political act to terrify as many people as possible by selecting civilian targets in a more or less random fashion. It is hard to find anything noble or justifiable in their actions. Terrorism tactics have evolved during the last few decades, and mostly civilians are victims of the global war on terrorism because terrorism is the arm of the weaker.

For the purpose of this paper, I would like to focus on how to solve the root causes of terrorism in order to have stable peace. As I have seen firsthand in Afghanistan in the last four decades, especially since September 11, I strongly believe that with only military tools, you cannot win the war on terrorism. As every conflict is unique, the reasons for terroristic acts in different parts of the world are different, and there is a need for a different approach. It needs vision, patience, and the right approach to mobilize the entire community for a collective response.

The following theoretical questions are important to ask:

- Why do people resort to terrorism or violence of any kind?
- How does the asymmetric nature of these conflicts contribute to what many call terrorism, the “weapon of the weak”?
- How does the fact that terrorists operate outside the state-centered international system affect the ability of these states to deal with terrorism?
- Can terrorism be defeated solely, largely, or primarily by the use of force?
- Should we negotiate or deal with terrorists in other ways that do not involve the use of force? If so, how?

First of all, there is no quick solution to terrorism and needs patience and vision to address this phenomenon with a collective response within a country and also among the international community. Collective responses include supporting legitimate government, improving governance, and in the long run, focusing on education systems to prevent the radicalization of youth.

Secondly, we have seen in many cases that in order to find a solution for all conflicts, you need to use carrots and sticks. Therefore, in order to end the war on terrorism, at some point, we have to talk with terrorist groups and individuals. I believe the root causes of terrorism should be addressed. The rule of law should be strengthened, and social injustice should be addressed. The process of addressing social injustice should be an inclusive process to have people's support. In the case of Afghanistan, many people do not have sympathy with terrorists, but failure of governance, corruption, and the monopoly of power contributed to instability. Bad guys, mafia networks, and terrorists always fill the vacuum created by bad governance.

In 2003, when I was in the government of Afghanistan, there were two arguments: Should we bring 'bad guys' (warlords and criminals) under the tent to achieve short-term stability? Or should we focus on the rule of law and address short-term problems that would impact long-term stability? I was part of the second group, and I believe we were right. Unfortunately, the first group, including President Karzai and mostly the senior US leadership in Afghanistan, had a strong say and won the argument. Many people who believed in the second approach, including myself, left the government. We later saw that military power and money alone did not solve Afghanistan's problems, and accommodating 'bad guys' further exacerbated insecurity.

In 2003, most of the Taliban were ready for peaceful integration into the community and government. Unfortunately, national and international stakeholders were against integrating the Taliban and wanted to eliminate them. The Taliban had no choice but to fight back, with the protection of sanctuaries in Pakistan, where they continued their struggle and eventually took power in August 2021. The famous saying among the Taliban is that if the international community had watched, they would have had time to continue their fighting until the last international soldiers left Afghanistan. Their strategy of patience exhausted international support for the Afghan government, eventually leading to its collapse. Of course, internal division, bad governance, and a lack of vision in Afghan political and government leadership also played significant roles.

Thirdly, I agree that conflict resolution specialists and governments should reframe the terms of debate by broadening space for creative discussions. They should not portray the war on terrorism as a religious conflict or clash of civilizations. In this context, diplomacy should be the main tool of engagement, supporting civil society, and having credible organizations as partners is crucial for more debate and engagement at the grassroots level. Additionally, addressing social injustice is vital for stable and enduring peace.

Finally, we must work with the new generation, especially youth, to educate them and prevent radicalization, and provide better opportunities because many developing countries are facing a rise in youth population. Although there are no proper statistics in Afghanistan, about 68% of the Afghan population is under the age of 25[87]. In Afghanistan's case, there should be a focus on a new curriculum that includes peacebuilding as part of the education system. During my time at the United States Institute of Peace, we worked with education institutions in Afghanistan to engage with university students. The Ministry of Higher Education accepted our curriculum, which was tested at a private and public universities as a two-credit syllabus.

[87] www.youthpolicy.org (Afghanistan National Youth Policy 2013)

As mentioned by Charles Hauss in his book 'International Conflict Resolution,' '...it must be acknowledged that none of these non-violent options will end terrorism soon, on their own.' I do agree with him on this assumption."[88]

The United States 'Response to September 11 and Toppling of the Taliban Regime

As the Cold War ended, there was hope for a safer world. With the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, the expectation was that peace would return to Afghanistan. However, despite over three decades passing, Afghanistan remains mired in conflict. Journalist Robert Kaplan's warning of a "coming anarchy," a mix of crime, poverty, environmental degradation, and war, paints a picture of a volatile and violent world. While some regions like South Africa and Northern Ireland have seen progress, many areas including the Middle East, Africa, Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan continue to grapple with conflicts, hindered by various domestic, geopolitical, and geo-economic factors. Thus, there's a pressing need to develop conflict resolution skills to address local, regional, and international disputes.

The Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) led by the United States commenced on October 7, 2001, with allied airstrikes targeting Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. President George W. Bush announced these strikes, which continued for five days. The Taliban's grip weakened, culminating in the fall of Kandahar on December 7, 2001, marking a significant blow to Taliban control[89]. Despite these successes, the Taliban and al-Qaeda endured, highlighting the challenge of eradicating them entirely.

Reflecting on the aftermath of September 11, my longtime friend Professor David Edwards and I expressed concerns about the potential fierceness of the U.S. response, given the substantial damage to economic and military centers. In our op-ed titled "Enlisting Afghan Aid," published in The Washington Post on September 16, 2001, we cautioned against repeating the Soviet Union's mistakes during its Afghan occupation. Here's an excerpt from that op-ed:

"Osama bin Laden anticipates a U.S. attack on Afghanistan as part of his holy war, a clash of civilizations. We must not fall into his trap but instead view Afghans as potential allies. To counter bin Laden's strategy, we must involve Afghan leaders in crafting an interim government, avoiding puppetry perceptions, and committing to rebuilding Afghanistan's infrastructure with

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[88] Hauss, Charles; International Conflict Resolution, published by the Continuum Int. Publishing Group Inc, 2010 page 149.

[89] http://edition.cnn.com/2013/10/28/world/operation-enduring-freedom-fast-facts/ (last accessed 22 August 2015)

substantial international assistance."

The subsequent years saw shifts in Afghanistan's leadership and notable events such as the death of Osama Bin Laden in Pakistan in 2011 and Mullah Mohammad Omar in 2013. Despite these developments, terrorism and insurgency persist due to unaddressed root causes, perpetuating Afghanistan's conflict-ridden status quo.

Post-Taliban era and the Global War on Terror in Afghanistan

The Bonn Conference, hosted by the United Nations in Germany from December 2-5, 2001, resulted in the Bonn Agreement, which established the Afghan Interim Authority and outlined the process for creating a new constitution and government. Hamid Karzai took office as the head of the interim power-sharing government on December 22, 2001[90]. However, a notable shortcoming of the Bonn agreement was the exclusion of the Taliban and Hezb-e-Islami, as only four Afghan factions participated in forming the interim government.

The key provisions of the Bonn Agreement were as follows[91]:

1. Establishment of the Interim Authority upon the official transfer of power on December 22, 2001.
2. Composition of the Interim Authority, including an Interim Administration presided over by a Chairman, a Special Independent Commission for the Convening of the Emergency Loya Jirga, and a Supreme Court of Afghanistan, along with other courts established by the Interim Administration.
3. Transfer of Afghan sovereignty to the Interim Authority, representing Afghanistan in external relations and international institutions.
4. Convening of an Emergency Loya Jirga within six months to decide on a Transitional Authority until free and fair elections are held.
5. Dissolution of the Interim Authority upon establishment of the Transitional Authority.
6. Convening of a Constitutional Loya Jirga within eighteen months of the Transitional Authority's establishment to adopt a new constitution.

The Interim Administration comprised a Chairman, five Vice Chairmen, and 24 members. Key ministries were controlled by the Northern Alliance, including the first Vice Chairman of the Interim Authority, leading to anticipation of government reshuffling after the Emergency Loya Jirga in June 2002.

As a member of the Emergency Loya Jirga, I witnessed a majority decision being undermined. The discussion was dominated by warlords who sought to retain power and suppress the Taliban. This led to disappointment among

[90] ibid

[91] http://www.un.org/News/dh/latest/afghan/afghan-agree.htm (last accessed 22 August 2015)

many Loya Jirga members, particularly Pashtuns, who felt marginalized and distrusted the new government.

The appointment of former Northern Alliance members to key ministries further fueled resentment, especially among Pashtuns. This situation, coupled with mixed messages from the US and international forces, contributed to a security vacuum that allowed the resurgence of Taliban, al-Qaeda sympathizers, and criminal networks. The delayed support for Afghan National Police until 2006 exacerbated the security challenges, paving the way for insurgencies and criminal activities

Challenges and Political Strategy Gaps in Afghanistan

If we look to the recent past, which is living history for Afghans because those who witnessed it are still alive, the Soviet Union gradually increased their influences and forces in Afghanistan without a clear vision of what to achieve in the long run. The Soviet Union invaded on 27 December 1979 in order to defeat the Mujahidin resistance swiftly and save the collapse of the communist regime. However, the Soviet Union's invasion was seen by the Afghan people, as well as by the international community, as a violation of the UN charter. They faced fierce resistance from the Afghan people. The Russians claimed that they had been invited to the country at the behest of President Amin's government and that they were not invading the country. They claimed that their task was to support a legitimate government and that the Mujahidin were no more than terrorists. This argument lacked substance as the Soviet forces killed Hafizullah Amin, the man they claimed to have invited them. Therefore, it is illogical to think that someone will invite others to kill him/her. The Soviet forces tried to subdue and eliminate the Mujahidin resistance quickly, but instead, the Mujahidin resistance received a major boost in the form of open-ended support from the West and Islamic countries.

The Afghanistan war became a war economy for regional and international criminal networks, so-called experts and consultants, and different national and international organizations. To illustrate this phenomenon, one of our colleagues at UNAMA shared an analogy comparing consultancy in Afghanistan to a game of Afghan Buzkashi. In this analogy, horsemen compete for scores individually, even though they are part of the same team. He wrote that when you discover that you are riding a dead horse, the best strategy is to dismount and find a new horse. But the aid and donor organizations in Afghanistan, instead of changing horses, set up committees to study the horse; arrange visits to other countries to see how others ride dead horses; lower the standards so that dead horses can be included; reclassify the dead horse as living "impaired"; hire outside contractors who claim they can ride the dead horses; harness several dead horses together to increase their speed; provide additional funding and/or training to increase the dead horse's performance; perform a productivity study to see if lighter riders would improve the dead horse's

performance; declare that as the dead horse does not have to be fed, it is less costly, carries lower overhead, and therefore contributes substantially more to the mission of the organization than do some other horses; rewrite the expected performance requirements for all horses; and if all else fails, set up a workshop with paid attendants on the subject of riding dead horses in post-conflict settings. This analogy humorously reflects the ineffective and often absurd approaches taken by aid organizations and donors in Afghanistan.

The US and their allies made the same mistakes in Afghanistan as did the Soviet Union. In 2009, I wrote a paper that was published by the Middle East Institute in Washington DC. The paper, titled "Navigating Afghan Asymmetric Warfare: Lessons from History," highlighted the recurring mistakes made by foreign powers in Afghanistan and underscored the need for a nuanced understanding of Afghan society, values, and aspirations. It emphasized the historical patterns of failed interventions and the importance of aligning strategies with Afghan realities [92] .

In my paper, I delved into the Mujahidin tactics of asymmetric warfare in the 1980s, highlighting their utilization of traditional methods of communication to incite people to rise against the communist regime. These tactics included hit-and-run attacks, targeting weak locations, government officials, and supporters, using poetry, burning schools, preventing cooperation with the government, distributing pamphlets against the communist regime and the Soviet Forces, infiltrating among the security institutions, and acquiring arms and ammunition from government forces, among others.

Similarly, the Taliban and al-Qaeda have adopted similar tactics but with more sophistication. For example, they utilize mobile phones, suicide bombers, the internet, and better strategic communication to recruit more people. The brutality of tactics employed by Taliban, Daesh (ISIS), and al-Qaeda is notably higher compared to the Mujahidin in the 1980s. Additionally, their networks extend globally, making their appeal and impact far-reaching.

In conclusion, the history of foreign interventions in Afghanistan, including those by the Soviet Union and the United States, reveals recurring patterns of mistakes. These mistakes stem from a failure to grasp the complexities of Afghan society, values, and aspirations. Attempts to impose ideologies or support weak allies have often backfired, leading to prolonged conflict and instability.

To achieve lasting peace and stability in Afghanistan, it is imperative to engage

[92] In the Grip of Conflicts: Special Edition Afghanistan, (1979-2009) https://www.mei.edu/publications/introduction-afghanistan-1979-2009-grip-conflict (last accessed on April 18, 2024)

with Afghan stakeholders, respect their autonomy, and work towards inclusive governance that reflects Afghan values. Building trust, addressing grievances, and promoting sustainable development are key pillars in this endeavor. The international community must learn from past errors and collaborate with Afghans to chart a path forward that prioritizes peace, security, and prosperity for all Afghans.

Unraveling the Emergence of Taliban insurgency: The Influence of Illicit Economy and Criminal Networks in Asymmetric Warfare

The US and allied forces repeated the same mistakes as the Soviet Union by gradually increasing their military presence and assistance to the Afghan government. This occurred despite two major issues: first, the Afghan government's inefficiency and corruption, and second, its growing hostility towards US policies. The Taliban received similar open-ended support as the Mujahideen, thanks to funding from Pakistan, Arab Sheikhs, drug money, and tolls taken from US assistance. This enabled them to sustain long-term asymmetric warfare in Afghanistan effectively. An estimate reported by the Associated Press highlighted that "the Taliban could be using U.S. tax dollars to kill American soldiers," with up to $360 million reportedly ending up in Taliban and criminal elements' hands over the past decade.

Since the 2001 US-led invasion of Afghanistan, the poppy trade has played a critical destabilizing role. It has corrupted the Afghan government and police while also financing the Taliban's resurgence. Taliban commanders at the village level have expanded their involvement in drug activities, ranging from extortion and protection fees to running heroin refineries, engaging in kidnapping, smuggling, and extracting minerals. In a paper I wrote for my MA thesis in 2014, I mentioned, "As insurgent commanders become more deeply tied to criminal activity, it will become increasingly difficult for the coalition of foreign forces in Afghanistan to defeat them." While there is variation across the war theater, drug profits flow up the Taliban's command chain and other insurgent and extremist groups along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. These funds play a pivotal role in financing their operational costs. It's estimated that the Taliban earns around $300 million from drug trafficking and cultivation. For more information, you can refer to the USIP report[93], which demonstrates how the Taliban's asymmetric warfare benefited from illegal drugs, mines, and international assistance, ultimately outmatching government and international forces.

The Emergence of IS-K in Afghanistan: Factors, Impacts, and Responses

The Taliban demonstrated remarkable resilience in their ongoing conflict against the Afghan government, which was supported by coalition forces. This

[93] http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/resources/taliban_opium_1.pdf (last accessed 23 August 2015)

backing came after the Taliban's initial downfall in December 2001. Following the tragic events of September 11, the US responded without a clear long-term strategy for stabilizing Afghanistan. During his 2009 campaign, President Obama emphasized the necessity of defeating al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, pledging support for the war effort[94]. However, upon assuming office, he faced recommendations from military commanders to increase ground forces.

In December 2009, President Obama authorized an additional 30,000 troops but set a condition for the gradual withdrawal of US forces starting in 2011, with full withdrawal by 2014[95]. This surge brought the total number of US forces to over 100,000, alongside approximately 39,000 troops from NATO countries, totaling about 140,000 foreign troops in Afghanistan[96]. This surpassed the number of Soviet forces during their occupation, which peaked around 100,000. The Soviet-Afghan War saw around 14,500 Soviet troops killed over nine years, along with significant civilian and Mujahideen casualties[97].

The Mujahideen's success against the Soviets was attributed to their resilience and extensive support from Western allies and Islamic countries, particularly the US and Saudi Arabia. When President Obama announced the withdrawal timetable, a captured Taliban fighter remarked, "You have the watches. We have the time," reflecting the Taliban's patience and strategic outlook[98]. They anticipated the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) would falter post-withdrawal, but the reality was different; while 2015 saw ANSF struggles, they held significant areas despite Taliban attacks.

The Afghan government, supported by NATO's Resolute Support mission and coalition forces, received training, mentoring, and financial aid until its collapse in August 2021. This support included military advisors, equipment, and funding for ANSF. The announcement of the withdrawal date boosted Taliban morale, although ethnic fighting, unlike Iraq post-US withdrawal in 2011, was initially avoided due to Taliban dominance and coalition efforts to maintain stability.

The rise of ISIS, tracing roots to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's activities in Iraq post-9/11, escalated after the Arab Spring in 2011 and US forces' withdrawal from

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94 http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/18/us/politics/18vets.html?_r=0 (last accessed 23 August 2015)

95 http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8389778.stm (last accessed 23 August 2015)

96 http://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-11371138 (last accessed 23 August 2015)

97 http://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2014/08/the-soviet-war-in-afghanistan-1979-1989/100786/ (last accessed 23 August 2015)

98 http://www.newsweek.com/10-years-afghan-war-how-taliban-go-68223 (last accessed 23 August 2015)

Iraq. ISIS's expansion into Syria and its subsequent split with al-Qaeda underscored the complexity of militant dynamics [99] .

In Afghanistan, ISIS's emergence in 2015 initially faced skepticism due to lacking on-ground presence. However, with former TTP commander Hafiz Saeed Khan as head of IS-K, signaled a growing threat[100]. President Ghani's warning highlighted IS-K potential to disrupt regional security, leading to clashes with both Taliban and government forces. Drone strikes targeting IS-K leaders like Hafiz Saeed Khan[101] weakened their influence, yet IS-K persists, challenging Taliban authority through asymmetric warfare.

As governor of Nangarhar province, my first hand efforts of counterterrorism and fighting against IS-K in 2019-2020 provide valuable militant dynamics, shedding light on the ongoing complexities in Afghanistan's security landscape (Reference: "Winning a battle while losing the war: an assessment of Afghan-led, US-Supported counterinsurgency in Nangarhar Province, 2019-2020," published by the Emerging Economies Cases Journal in 2023).[102]

Lessons learned from Asymmetric Warfare in Afghanistan

The history of the last five decades of asymmetric warfare in Afghanistan leads to a final conclusion and lessons learned:

1. The root causes of asymmetric warfare are primarily political and social grievances.
2. The undemocratic nature of governance in many countries contributes significantly to the factors driving asymmetric warfare.
3. Investing in social justice, the rule of law, and improving governance should be the primary policy focus of all governments to eliminate excuses for those engaged in asymmetric warfare.
4. The immense cost of fighting asymmetric warfare, amounting to trillions of dollars, highlights the potential impact of redirecting even a fraction of these funds towards addressing social injustices, enforcing the rule of law, and promoting good governance.
5. Conventional military tactics alone cannot defeat asymmetric warfare, which provides insurgents, terrorists, or criminal networks with

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[99] http://www.academia.edu/9879796/The_Emergence_of_the_Islamic_State_ISIS_in_Iraq_and_Syria (last accessed 23 August 2015)

[100] http://www.breitbart.com/national-security/2015/01/29/isis-expands-into-khorasan-territory-af-pak-india-region/ (last accessed 23 August 2015)

[101] http://tribune.com.pk/story/918967/islamic-state-leader-hafiz-saeed-killed-in-us-drone-strike/ (last accessed 23 August 2015)

[102] https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/25166042231185438 (last accessed on April 16, 2024)

opportunities to recruit due to civilian casualties, poverty, and limited opportunities for youth.

6. Dependence on external support is inherent in asymmetric warfare, cautioning against the use of state-sponsored proxies for strategic objectives, as these groups can eventually turn against the sponsoring nation's security.
7. Asymmetric warfare thrives in environments where internal conditions allow for hiding and finding shelter within communities.
8. Those engaged in asymmetric warfare seek to discredit governing authorities and instill fear in communities through terrorist actions, making their task relatively straightforward.
9. Civilian populations bear the brunt of casualties in asymmetric warfare, as evidenced in the case of Afghanistan.
10. Combating asymmetric warfare requires regional and global alliances, as no single nation can tackle it effectively in isolation.
11. Disrupting the economic resources that sustain asymmetric warfare is crucial to its defeat.
12. Asymmetric warfare disregards established rules and employs brutal tactics such as beheadings and immolations, showing a lack of respect for human dignity.
13. Prolonged asymmetric warfare leads to increased brutality and undermines the original cause of justice that may have sparked the conflict.
14. A collective response involving governments, communities, religious institutions, and educational establishments is necessary to counter the brutality of asymmetric warfare effectively.
15. Investing in education, particularly promoting peace education and coexistence in curricula, is vital from an early age to foster a culture of peace.
16. Asymmetric warfare transcends religious ideology or cultural boundaries and can occur in any part of the world.
17. Those engaged in asymmetric warfare adapt their tactics, using various ideologies such as religion, nationalism, or local grievances to sustain their causes.
18. Addressing asymmetric warfare requires tailored strategies specific to each country, as there is no one-size-fits-all approach.
19. Effective communication strategies are essential in combating asymmetric warfare.
20. Patience is crucial in defeating asymmetric warfare, as addressing root causes is a long-term process that requires sustained effort.